

A Re-Examination of the Love Canal Crisis: The Myth and the  
Reality

by  
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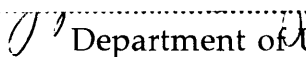
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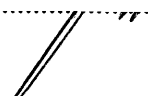
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# A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE LOVE CANAL CRISIS:

## THE MYTH AND THE REALITY

by

JORGETTE THEOPHILIS

Submitted to the Department of Urban Planning and Studies  
on April 1, 1996 in partial fulfillment of the  
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### ABSTRACT

The subject of this thesis is the myth I uncovered about the environmental crisis which occurred at Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York, in 1978. The myth is the series of omissions, untruths and distortions which characterize the way the events of the crisis, its resolution and the scope and cause of the environmental hazard are reported. The myth consists of 6 major elements which center on the (1) portrayal of all affected residents as homeowners (2) who are represented by the Love Canal Homeowners Association and (3) are led by community-wide activist Lois Gibbs. (4) Residents are "victorious" and (5) the crisis ended in 1980 when homeowners settled with government. The mythic version ignores the (6) wide-spread nature of the environmental crisis in the Greater Niagara region. The myth is also a series of narratives which re-enforce powerful cultural stories.

The source of my analysis is three-fold: the most often-cited "dominant literature", the less-known "alternative" literature and new information I gathered from the Niagara Falls Housing Authority and interviews I conducted. I reviewed the dominant literature consisting of books, article and reports found in academic, scientific and popular journals and newspapers. I also found and reviewed little-known reports and articles which suggest another version of events. In my original research, I interviewed the leaders of the Renters Association, Lois Gibbs, and the Executive Director of the Niagara Falls Housing Authority. I also analyzed data received from the Niagara Falls Housing Authority about the specific characteristics of the renters as a group.

I argue that both the mythic and anti-mythic stories are significant. The myth protects the interests of the Federal government and the homeowners' association and re-enforces the "truth" of underlying cultural stories about the "little people who overcome hardship". Because the mythic version fails to place events in a historical context, it ignores the true extent of the hazardous waste problem in the Greater Niagara Region and the fact that the

US military is the true culprit. The anti-myth shows that reporters and academics focus on groups with more status in the society because of class or race, and often portray them as the “legitimate” victims of disaster. The anti-myth reveals the fact that there is a serious nation-wide health and environmental problem resulting from chemical and nuclear contamination caused by Military activities during and after World War II. The anti-myth also shows that the Federal government often deals with communities affected by environmental disaster by using divide and conquer tactics, negotiating with one group to avoid giving all citizens their common, long-term goals. In addition, the anti-myth suggests that the popular portrait of Lois Gibbs needs to be re-considered in light of her exclusion of blacks and the poor from her organizing effort.

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## **DEDICATION**

**With love, gratitude and admiration, I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Demetra Theopilis, who raised me. When I was a little girl, she taught me to question authority and to see the beauty of the earth, two lessons which have served me well in my life and studies.**

**To my sister, Maria, who has always been there for me, with her encouraging smile, generosity and love.**

**To the memory of my grandmother, Maria Gootos, who came from a mountain village in Greece and always dreamed of getting an education.**

**I wrote this thesis with and for all of you.**

## **Acknowledgements**

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And I thank the wonderful teachers I have had. To Dr. Howard Zinn, for teaching me to be a critical thinker and to probe rather than simply accept information. To Dr. Jill Conway, who showed me what is possible. To Prof. Mel King, who demonstrates the possibility of combining scholarship and activism. To Dr. Phil Clay, from whom I learned how to investigate and to follow my instincts. To Dr. Don Schon, who showed me that issues are not only black/white but many shades.

To Ollie Sawtelle, for taking me to Niagara Falls and for giving me great directions for getting back there on my own! To Francis Sawtelle and Marlyn Euler for their hospitality and interest. And to the staff of the Calla Lily Cafe for giving me a friendly place to write, endless coffee and free electricity! To the memory of Benji, and all the days, "we walked in fields of gold." And to Ollie, Meesh McCarthy, Vincent Hogan and BVK for always being there.

## Chapter 1:

### Introduction

In the late 1970's, the only visible signs of the environmental disaster at Love Canal were the corroded barrels exploding and the black chemical ooze coming to the surface of the 99th Street elementary school playground and adjacent homes. Government investigations revealed widespread chemical contamination of the residential community located outside of Niagara Falls NY. Reporters identified the source of the contamination as the canal located beneath the community at which over 21,800 tons of chemicals had been dumped during the years 1942-53 by the Hooker Chemical Company and the US Army. Chemicals such as benzene and dioxin were migrating from the underground canal, contaminating air, water and soil. Because the crisis at Love Canal was the first incidence of widespread chemical contamination of a residential neighborhood, it is significant in a number of different ways.

First, the crisis made evident the hidden regional and national problem of toxic waste contamination. There are between 30-40,000 toxic waste sites located throughout the United States and as many as one in four Americans live within three miles of one (AP, New York Times, 3/25/93, "State Agency Closes Office at Love Canal"). In the Niagara Frontier region alone, there are 215 toxic waste sites (Levine, 1982, 218), many remaining from chemical weapons production during World War II and the Korean War and Manhattan Project activities. Before Love Canal, these sites were unidentified and there were no procedures to deal with the myriad of resulting health and environmental problems. There was also no available funds to provide for the containment and clean-up of the chemicals.

Second, many of the procedures used and policies developed at Love Canal have become precedents. Because the Love Canal disaster was the first caused not by natural forces but by human actions, government and health officials were unprepared for the new set of problems (Environmental Reporter, 1984, 840). In addition, the way the contamination was remediated and the victims compensated became the basis for drafting national legislation to deal with hazardous waste issues and clean-up. The US Congress passed the Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation and Liability Act in 1980, providing financing for cleanup efforts through the Superfund and requiring the Environmental Protection Agency to develop a National Priorities List of hazardous waste sites (New York Times, "Superfund: Pouring Money Down a Hole", 4/17/92).

Third, one resident organization, the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA), has come to be taken as an example of a new type of social movement. Not only is the LCHA portrayed as a lobbying group but as, "one of the most successful single-cause grassroots movements of recent American history (Gibbs, XV, 1981)." The LCHA's organizing tactics and methods are perpetuated, in part because of the personal fame of LCHA President Lois Gibbs, who founded the Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes in Arlington, VA. Widely recognized as a national leader and activist,

Gibbs now advises community groups nation-wide. The LCHA and Gibbs are often pointed to as an example of the transformative nature of environmental crisis which leads minorities and previously uninvolved individuals to assume leadership and to develop political organizations.

### **My Inquiry**

I became interested in researching the Love Canal story to determine what had led women who had adopted traditional roles as homemakers to transform themselves and become the leaders and front-line workers at Love Canal. In the course of my research, however, my focus evolved. This happened in 4 major stages. Each time my focus changed it was either because I identified a pattern of gaps in the available information or because I had collected new information. In the Fall of 1994, I undertook original research in Niagara Falls, interviewing the leaders of the three citizen organizations, and obtaining data from the Niagara Falls Housing Authority; I will explain more about my research in the following paragraphs.

In the first stage of my research, I focused on the nature of transformative female leadership. Because I believed that the LCHA was an example of a democratic grassroots organization made up of groups traditionally split along race, class and gender lines, I thought the fact that they faced a common environmental threat had allowed people to overcome discrimination and become unified. Initially, I thought the fact that Gibbs, a woman, was the leader, and that barriers of gender discrimination had been overcome, would have made it easier for racial and class barriers to be also overcome.

As I continued my reading of the literature about Love Canal, I identified a series of significant gaps and omissions in available information which coalesced around two subjects: the environmental story and the renters who lived in the public housing development at Love Canal. While much of the available information about Love Canal focuses on the white homeowner population, most of the missing information was about the renters. While information was available about the homeowners' benefits package, no information was available about the renters. In part because 65% of the renters were Black, I wondered if their story had been hidden because it revealed some sort of unfair treatment.

In the second stage, I focused on the benefits packages and on determining whether the inequities I uncovered showed that environmental racism had occurred. The new information I collected showed that not all residents were "victorious" at Love Canal. The idea that the renters had been treated unfairly because they were primarily Black seemed possible. As in other cases of environmental racism, the Blacks received little compensation although they received greater exposure to the contaminant than the homeowners in the outer areas. Neither the national press nor the scholars who wrote about the crisis and the settlement ever mentioned this injustice. Instead, the renters' story- indeed their very existence- was almost completely ignored. I wanted to identify the reason for their "invisibility" and lack of success. To get more answers, I went to Niagara Falls, located and interviewed

the leaders of the Renters Association and their advocates. My analysis became complicated by the fact that although the renters said they had been treated unfairly, they were granted all but one of the list of demands they had presented to government.

In the third stage of my research, I focused on the organizing efforts of homeowners and renters to determine if the differential outcome was a result of different organizing capacities. In my interviews with the Renters Association's leaders and their advisors, I got information about the organization's history and organizing methods. From my research, it became apparent that the renters were very effective organizers- even given the disadvantage they were at because homeowners had from the beginning more resources, more powerful advisors and more access to the press. I realized that none of the three approaches was sufficient by itself to explain why the injustice had occurred and what it meant.

This realization brought me to the fourth and final stage of my inquiry, in which I examined the possibility that the gaps themselves- the omissions and the distortions- formed a pattern which suggested that there is a myth- a widely-accepted story- about Love Canal- which is not complete or fully true. The telling of events at Love Canal has become a "story" with a set of main characters, a conflict, themes and resolution. The subjects of the popular story are the almost completely white homeowners living in the lower middle-class Love Canal neighborhood. According to this story, most wives stayed at home to care for children while husbands went to work at nearby chemical plants. They had attained the American dream, living in single-family homes in a peaceful, residential neighborhood. Incursions into this life occurred sporadically when chemicals oozed into people's basements, or when corroded barrels burst through the surface of the ground at the school playground. The dream became a nightmare when it was revealed that the homes were built on a chemical dump. Residents who had previously never been involved in civic affairs, created a democratically-led organization to force government to "do the right thing". After a protracted, two year battle, residents triumphed, and government promised to purchase their homes. Although a number of health and environmental problems still linger, this popular account communicates the sense that a just resolution had been effected because people were compensated for loss in property values.

This story is a myth because it omits and distorts information which reveals another, less judicious and resolved outcome. It is a myth because it ignores the story of the "other" families who lived at Love Canal - the poorest, primarily Black single-mothers and their children who lived in the federally-financed housing development adjacent to the Canal. To understand the reason for the unjust outcome, I realized I had to first uncover the myth.

### **Thesis Organization**

To shed light on how and why the myth was created and which actors it benefits, my thesis will challenge the mythic version and present an alternate. Before doing this, I will present some background information in



Chapter 2 about the historical development of the Love Canal neighborhood, the creation of the hazard, and salient points of the 1978 crisis. In order to identify the pattern of omissions and distortions, in Chapter 3, I will analyze the “dominant” accounts- the most widely-read works which perpetuate some or all of the elements of the myth. In Chapter 4, I will challenge the myth by reviewing the “alternate” literature, comprised of little-known and cited works which report on the hidden aspects of the Love Canal story. In this chapter, I will also incorporate information from my interviews with the leaders of the 3 citizens organizations at Love Canal, the renters’ advocates, the Executive Director of the Niagara Falls Housing Authority, and results of the analysis of Niagara Falls Housing Authority renter data. In Chapter 5, I will consider how and why the myth was created, whose interests it benefits, and what lessons can be learned.

### **A Brief Overview of the Major Elements of the Myth**

The myth consists of a number of significant omissions of information and distortions in interpretation which form a pattern. These center on 2 primary themes: the telling of the story of the Love Canal crisis and afterward and the cause and scope of the environmental problems. The myth is composed of 7 major elements. The elements of the first category include mis-representations in basic information about the population composition and housing-type of the neighborhood. The second element of the myth is the depiction of Gibbs and the Love Canal Homeowners’ Associations as community-wide rather than representative of a particular sector of affected residents.

The third and fourth elements of the myth are centered on the settlement effected to resolve the crisis. The third aspect represents the settlement as a “victory” for all residents instead of a success for homeowners and a failure for renters. The fourth element of the myth concerns the duration of the crisis and its conclusion. Rather than showing that many renters continued living at the Canal for years after the homeowners moved away, the dominant writers state that the crisis ended in 1980- the year most homeowners sold their homes.

The elements of the second category of the myth have to do with significant omissions of information about the environmental aspects of the crisis. The fifth element of the myth is the treatment of Love Canal as an isolated event rather than as an indicator of the regional and national problem of toxic waste contamination. The sixth element of the myth is the failure to trace the causes of the dumping, namely the production and manufacturing of chemical weapons and other war materials. The seventh element is the downplaying of the role of the US Army in the dumping and creation of the crisis, ignoring the responsibility and liability questions this raises.

## Chapter 2:

### **History of the Love Canal Area and Crisis**

The purpose of this chapter is to present different background information about the uses of the Canal, the development of the Love Canal area, the creation of the hazard, and the events of the crisis. The four major periods of the Love Canal area's development reflect the economic trends shaping the Greater Niagara Region. In the first period of development when industry was attracted by cheap and plentiful power, the canal was partially excavated. In the second period when workers began migrating to the area to work in industry, the first large-scale residential development of the Love Canal area occurred. In the third period, when the chemical and defense industries became entrenched in the Greater Niagara Region, Hooker Electrochemical Company, the City of Niagara Falls and the US Army dumped toxic, municipal, and Manhattan-project waste in the Canal. In the fourth period, the canal became the center of a residential neighborhood.

### **Geography of the Area**

The Love Canal community is located in a 16-acre area in the extreme southeast section of Niagara Falls. The Canal is located between 97th and 99th Street, bounded by Frontier Avenue and Calvin Boulevard. After the Canal was capped with either soil or clay in 1953, the 99th Street elementary school was built on it in 1955. Dozens of homes were constructed around the school with adjacent yards; because they were in closest proximity to the Canal, they were termed "inner-ring" homes after the crisis began. Many of the homes were small, single-family ranch-style homes built in fairly close proximity to each other. Although there were only 25 homes in the entire area before the dumping began, by 1978, there were 239 in the "inner rings", and 550 in the "outer rings" of the area. In addition to the homes, there were 304 housing units arranged in 12 different "courts" in the LaSalle public housing development which was located directly west of the Canal on a 25-acre site bounded by 96th Street, Colvin Boulevard, 93rd Street and Frontier Avenue. At the closest point, the Development was only yards away from the former Canal.

### **Period One: early- late 1890's**

In the early 1890's, speculator William T. Love planned to connect the upper and lower parts of the Niagara River to create a power-producing canal. Because industry was attracted by cheap power, his project had the potential of being very successful. In addition to the construction of the canal, Love also envisioned building a Model City, a business district and residential center, at the banks of the Canal. Just as larger business interests led to Love's excavation of the Canal, so did national economic trends cause the abandonment of his project. The Depression of 1898, and the discovery of alternative sources of cheap power caused Love to lose most of his financial backing. The partially-excavated canal, which was 3,000 feet long and 100 feet wide, was left behind in the late 1890's.

### **Period II: late 1890's- 1941**

Before 1941, the area was only sparsely populated with 25 homes.

While the economy of the region was still primarily agricultural, the Love Canal area was isolated, rural, and inhabited by few (Fowlkes, 10). From the abandonment of the canal until 1941, the area remained much as it had been before, with the canal used primarily as a swimming hole. Up until the time when the dumping began in 1942, neighborhood children often enjoyed cooling off in the canal which had filled with water. Once the dumping began, children continued swimming there for a while, until some returned home burned. They continued playing around the area even when they stopped swimming there. Some would get phosphorous or "fire rocks" contaminated with chemicals, and throw them against objects to watch them ignite. (Zweig, 42).

Although there were few changes in the Canal area during this period, there were developments in the Niagara Falls area which would later affect the Love Canal area. Some of the major chemical companies arrived in Niagara Falls at the turn of the century and since 1910, the chemical industry's presence has been significant in the area. In fact, the arrival of this industry represents the first major development of the area. Although the effects of this development were not felt immediately, they began to be felt by the beginning of the 1940's.

There was one significant change in the area in response to the arrival of the chemical and defense industries. To accommodate the housing needs of workers migrating to the Niagara Falls area to work in the defense industry, the Federal government constructed Griffin Manor, a public housing development, at Love Canal in 1941. (Zweig, 28) This was the first large-scale residential development of the area, and occurred specifically because of the changes in the region's economy. As a result, there was an increase in the population of the area and a greater "level of activity". (Zweig, 28) This example shows the dynamic of change which marked the different uses of the Canal: the first significant residential development of the area occurred to accommodate the needs of the chemical industry and government- and was also carried out by the government.

### **Third Period: 1942-53: the Dumping**

This period coincides with the advent of the US' entrance into World War II, and continues through the Korean War and the atomic build-up of the 1950's. The great change in use of the Canal at this time coincides with the "second period" of development of the region- namely, the "entrenchment" (Zweig, 1982, 31) of the chemical and defense-related industries. As the first residential development resulted because of the needs of the defense and chemical industries, so did the dumping. Some of the giants of the industry, such as duPont, Olin Mathieson, Hooker, Carborundum, Goodyear Olin, and the Great Lakes Carbon Co. established themselves in the region. These industries gained predominance in the regional economy as shown by the fact that in 1980, chemical- related work accounted for more than 2/3 of industrial jobs in the area (34, Zweig). The chemical industry was also significant to the economy of Erie county, as shown by the fact that in 1970, in

the county there were 9 major chemical-producing companies which employed 5,275 people.

Not only did the chemical companies locate in the region, but so did various departments of the US government, such as the US Army-sponsored Manhattan Engineering Department, the Army Ordnance Department, and the Chemical Warfare Service. These units were primarily involved in three activities: conducting nuclear research, manufacturing chemicals, and producing weapons. (Zweig-4) The units developed relationships with chemical companies in a number of different ways: contracting out work to them, supervising production, or constructing facilities for them. In some instances, the US Army built facilities located directly on the property of chemical companies, such as the P-45 plant which was located on the main grounds of Hooker. In addition, the US Army also acquired land in the region, to produce weapons and to dispose of and/or store wastes. For example, the US Army bought the Haist Estates, which along with the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works, became one of the two major disposal sites of the wastes from various Manhattan Project activities (88).

Much of the waste was generated by the weapons build-up, which included production of chemical weapons, explosives such as impregnite and TNT, and radioactive materials for the Manhattan Project. Much, though not all of the material dumped in the Canal was generated to fulfill government contracts. For example, 60% of Hooker's business at this time was of this kind. Although it is unclear exactly how much waste was dumped by Niagara Falls and the US Army, Hooker officials have admitted to disposing of 21,800 tons of waste at Love Canal. An analysis of this waste identified more than 200 different compounds in the Canal, including some of the most dangerous chemicals known to human-kind, such as benzene, a known human carcinogen. Other chemicals such as dioxin, were also identified in the Bloody Creek around the area, and it is presumed that these chemicals leached and migrated around the community, following the path of old stream-beds- or "swales."

#### **Fourth period: 1953- 1978**

In 1953 after the canal was nearly full of waste, its ownership changed again, as did its use. The Niagara Board of Education bought the canal and the surrounding land for \$1 from Hooker. The Board of Education ordered the construction of an elementary school close to the canal, and in 1955 construction of the 99th Street School was completed, with some 400 youngsters attending it that year. About the same number of children attended the School from the day it opened in 1955, until the day that the State Board of Health declared a health emergency 32 years later and ordered it closed.

The major residential development of the area occurred after 1953. As more workers migrated to the city to work in the chemical and defense plants, there was an increased demand for housing. To accommodate the influx of workers, the Niagara Board of Education built the 99th Street School in 1955 and sold parcels of land around the newly completed 99th Street School

adjacent to the Canal. Federal programs, such as those offered under FHA-guarantee and the GI Bill, were initiated to attract first-time home buyers and to construct moderate-income housing. (Fowlkes, 10) According to what has been written by many scholars, such as Dr. Levine, the homes were bought "for the most part by blue-collar workers" (13), many of whom worked in the chemical industry. In the early 1970's, the houses were sold at what was considered a "good price", ranging from \$18,000 to \$23,000. Indeed, according to reports, while there were only 25 homes in the area in 1953, by 1963 there were more than 150 in the immediate area. By the time of the crisis, in 1978, there were more than 700 homes within both the inner and outer rings. In addition, in 1970, construction of the LaSalle Housing Development was completed. This low-cost housing development, organized into 11 courts, contained 304 units of housing and housed 800 people. (Fowlkes, 10)

### **Creation of the Hazard**

Although most accounts of the crisis at Love Canal at least mention the different actors who dumped at the Canal, they often do not differentiate the **action of dumping** from the **creation of the hazard**. Many accounts simply speak about the disaster as something inevitable given the fact that the dumping had occurred; in reality, disaster could have been averted if the area had not been developed for residential use, or if residents had been warned of the dangers of the buried wastes. Indeed, the crisis at Love Canal occurred at least partly because the City of Niagara Falls and the Niagara Falls Board of Education decided to construct an elementary school on the former dump. In this section, I will examine the actions and decisions of the government and the Hooker Electrochemical Company.

Indeed, assessing the situation and placing blame is difficult because of the number of different actors involved, including different levels and agencies of government. In Hooker's estimation, for example, the Federal government shares liability not only because the US Army dumped in the Canal, but also because, "at times during World War II and the Korean War, 'essentially all of the output of OCC's Niagara Falls plant was allocated according to government directives ....'" (ER, 847) The question of blame becomes more complicated because not only did the Federal government build Griffon Manor and initiate the residential development of the area, but the US Army began dumping in the area less than one year later. Other agencies of the local government, such as the Board of Education, purchased the dump and the surrounding area despite the threat posed by the hazardous and toxic wastes buried in the Canal.

The Board of Education also took actions which compromised the health and well-being of the residents. Not only did the Board order the construction of the 99th Street School on top of the dump, but they also failed to notify the parents of the school children, the real estate agents, and the families who bought homes in the area surrounding the school, some with backyards adjacent to the former Canal. On different occasions, the Board ignored warnings indicating the danger of the chemicals. Not only did the Board ignore Hooker officials' explicit warnings not to build houses

around the Canal, but also when pools of chemicals were discovered during the construction of the 99th Street School, they did not stop construction. Rather, the Board decided to move the school some yards away.

The actions of the Board of Education raise questions about the extent to which the public agencies of the government fulfilled their responsibilities for the public good. In order to understand why and how the hazard was created, it is important to examine what the possible motives and benefits of these decisions could have been for both Hooker and the Board of Education. It is only possible to speculate about the motives; however, because both actors were sued following the declaration of emergency at Love Canal, and it is difficult to sort through the postures from the truth. Why Hooker officials relinquished the land to the Board of Education knowing the danger posed by the toxins buried in the Canal, and perhaps guessing that a school would be built there in the future, is puzzling.

Hooker probably had a number of different reasons for wanting to get rid of the Canal. Not only was the Canal increasingly becoming a liability, but by 1953, it was nearly full. By transferring ownership to the Niagara Falls Board of Education for \$1, Hooker could enjoy the benefits of a tax break, and transfer liability to another agent. Hooker believed that it had protected itself by getting the Board to sign a waiver of responsibility stating that it had been informed of the danger and would not seek compensation for future accidents or deaths resulting from exposure to the buried chemicals. While Hooker did sell the property to the Board of Education, it warned the Board not to build homes on the land.

The actions of the Board of Education are a bit more difficult to understand. Clearly, the Board was aware of population trends, and the need to accommodate the increasing numbers of people migrating from rural areas needing homes and schools for their children. Why they chose to accept Hooker's offer is somewhat puzzling because at the time there was a lot of available, cheap land which they could have purchased (Levine, 25). According to some such as Lois Gibbs, the members of the Board of Education were unsophisticated and unaware of the danger posed by the chemicals, and were misled by Hooker (Environmental Reporter, 815).

### **Anatomy of the Crisis**

Although residents of the Love Canal area had complained since 1943 about the chemical odors, fires, and other signs of toxic hazards, it was only in the late 1970's that the signs began to be heeded. The intense rain and snow storms of 1978 had brought chemicals that had been lurking right below the surface to the ground; some of this waste was found in backyards, basements of homes adjacent to the Canal, and in the playground of the 99th Street elementary school. Corroded barrels that had once contained chemicals exploded to the surface of the ground, and pools of chemicals appeared; the soil in some parts had a scarred, blighted appearance. (Zweig, 25).

The years 1976-78 could be characterized as a "discovery period" because the different actors were beginning to investigate the problem at Love Canal. The investigators included the media, the New York State Department

of Environmental Conservation, the NY State Department of Health, the Federal Environmental Protection Agency and Lois Gibbs. Each actor was prompted to begin investigating for different reasons, approaching their investigations from a number of different angles.

The queries of the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation were prompted by Canadian government representatives of the International Joint Commission who monitor the Great Lakes. In 1976 (Levine, 15) traces of the pesticide Mirax were detected in the fish of Lake Ontario, prompting testing to locate the source of the contamination. One possible source of the release of Mirax identified by the Department of Environmental Conservation(DEC) was the 102nd Street dump, close to the Love Canal, which had also been used as a dump by the Hooker Chemical Company. This discovery began focusing attention on the Love Canal area and thus made much more urgent the signs of trouble...such as pungent chemical smells and exposed pools of chemicals that had been going off since 1943.

Another investigator was the Niagara Gazette which began running stories about Love Canal in October, 1976, including a front-page article outlining the history of the dumping, the transactions and decisions made by Hooker and the Niagara Falls Board of Education which led up to the development of the area. Other articles continued, showing that test results confirmed that chemicals from the area originated from Hooker. The newspaper continued to document the discoveries of the investigation, providing information that residents like Lois Gibbs would later use to inform themselves.

Homemaker and future leader of the Love Canal Homeowners Association, Lois Gibbs, began her own investigation in June 1978 in response to the illness of her son and to her discovery that it could be a result of exposure to chemicals. Reading Michael Brown's articles in the Niagara Gazette helped to prepare her. Her discovery of the fact that the 99th Street school was on top of the Canal worried her, and led her to begin a campaign to have her son relocated to a different school, away from the contamination. After contact with officials who explained that the chemicals posed no problems and there was no need to remove the child, Gibbs realized that collective action was required to force school authorities to take appropriate measures. In the Spring of 1978, before any of the other test results collected by the Department of Environmental Conservation or the Department Of Health were released, Gibbs began circulating a petition to close the school. Going door-to-door, Gibbs talked to other residents, many of whom were unaware of the Canal and where it was located. As she collected signatures, she also collected information about residents; she acquired personal knowledge about the health problems of people living in different parts of the neighborhood.

In addition, a number of different government agencies: local, state and federal, conducted tests. Congressman LeFalce contacted the EPA in 1977 to take air samples from homes. In the Spring of 1978, EPA consultants took

samples from sump pumps, and storm sewers near Love Canal. In the Spring of 1978, the Department of Health was collecting soil samples from Love Canal. When it came to the attention of Dr. David Axelrod that the materials had come from a residential area, he became quite alarmed and alerted Commissioner Whalen about the possibility that "serious public health problems might exist at Love Canal." As a result, cleanup of the most visible signs of the contamination began, including cleanup of drums emerging at the surface of the site, and of standing puddles of chemical-laden water. In April, a fence was placed around the site of the former Canal. In 1978, the EPA repeated the warning of Axelrod, concluding that the toxic vapors in people's homes suggested a serious health threat. During the Spring of 1978, the EPA and New York state began investigating the health and environmental problems. The tests conducted during this period would show findings of exposed chemicals at the surface, and basement air readings of Ring I homes that had potentially dangerous levels of toxic vapors. In June, the Department Of Health began collecting questionnaires and blood samples from residents whose backyards were next to the Canal's surface.

In the Spring of 1978, as test results were coming back, the State government began to take a series of steps to deal with the hazard that they were coming increasingly to understand. In May, following the release of test results by the EPA and the NY State DEC, which showed there were exposed chemicals in the soil, and potentially dangerous levels of toxic vapors in basements, the State Department of Health decided to initiate the collecting of health data and blood samples from residents.

In August of 1978, after having analyzed 2800 blood specimens (Levine, 23), State Health Commissioner Whalen declared a state of emergency at the Love Canal site and issued a series of protective measures. He released compiled data which showed that women who lived in closest proximity to the dump in the "inner rings" adjacent to the Canal, had significantly higher incidence of birth defects and miscarriages than women living in the outer areas. The data also showed that there was a "slight risk of spontaneous abortions for all residents of the Canal, with the highest risk among those living in the Southern part". While the most extreme recommendation suggested the evacuation of pregnant women and children under the age of two, Whalen also issued directives to the entire Love Canal population.

The Commissioner made six recommendations. In addition to suggesting that the most vulnerable groups be evacuated, he also issued orders to close the 99th Street School. He ordered further health and environmental tests and initiated a "remediation" project to contain the chemicals leaching off site. All residents of the Canal were also advised to stop eating vegetables grown in their yards. A few days after the announcement of an emergency, the State of New York worked out a deal in which they agreed to pay for the 239 inner ring families to re-locate. Eventually the State bought out all the families owning property in this area for a fair-market price.



On the evening after Whalen's declaration of emergency, the Love Canal Homeowners' Association formerly came into being. An advocacy group for homeowners of the area, the LCHA became a powerful player in drawing national and international media attention to the crisis. Led by Lois Gibbs, the group represented the interests of those homeowners who were left behind after the evacuation of the inner rings, but who felt that they too were in danger. After a prolonged, two-year struggle with government, full of political negotiations, protests, legal actions, and even the kidnapping of two EPA officials, the group attained its goal, securing government funds for home buy-outs so that they could move from the area.

Though the LCHA got the greatest amount of attention, there were also 2 other citizen groups at Love Canal. The renters who lived in the LaSalle Housing Development, located to the west of the Canal, formed the Renters Association, led by Sarah Herbert. Although the concerns of the LCHA changed over time from health to property compensation, the Renters Association remained focused on health issues throughout the crisis. The third group, the Concerned Area Residents, was made up of homeowners dissatisfied with the LCHA, who wanted to create an "umbrella organization" which would combine the interests of both renters and homeowners. This organization was originally led by Nora Preuster but Bill Waggoner took over the presidency later. I will add more information about these groups in Chapter 4.

Love Canal was the first incident of a toxic crisis in a residential neighborhood; the world was watching. Governments on all levels were aware of the fact that although Love Canal was the first, it was only the beginning of a new wave of problems confronting industrialized society. The US Government did not want to set costly precedents. In order for the crisis to be resolved, all or some of a series of problems had to be worked out, and some kind of an agreement made between the powerful parties effected. These included not only the local, state and federal bureaucracies and politicians, but also the LCHA. A number of different questions were raised by the crisis which ensued. First of all, there was little information about the health effects of chronic exposure to toxic chemicals. Second, there was little agreement from experts about how to contain the contamination. Third, there were no procedures in place to deal with moving people, administering aid programs, and coordinating services. Fourth, the different levels of government didn't agree about which should assume financial and procedural responsibility for the services provided, the re-location costs, and the costs of the epidemiological and environmental tests.

Over the course of time, the picture of the contamination and where it was most acute became modified by the acceptance of the "swale theory" developed by Lois Gibbs and researched by her and scientist Beverly Paigen. This theory explained that the contamination could and did spread by following the pathways of underground stream beds, or swales that had once existed. Mapping out the traditional "wet" and "dry" areas, Gibbs and Paigen found that there were disease clusters particularly in the historically "wet"

areas. These findings altered the scene against which negotiations took place giving more credence to outer-ring homeowners who claimed that they deserved to be compensated.

Following two years of further struggle between 1978 and 1980, President Carter agreed in May of 1980 to buy out the homes in the "outer rings" of the Emergency Declaration Area. His decisions preceded two important events which had a great deal of political import: the release of chromosome tests and the taking of two EPA officials hostage. On May 16, 1980, the EPA released tests taken of 36 Love Canal residents which showed that 11, or 30% of them, had chromosomal damage. Normally, only 1% of the population has such damage. Scientists believe the chromosome damage results from exposure to toxins. Breakage of the strands of DNA, cause not only cause damage to the person, but also to his/her offspring. It raises the chances that the person will develop cancer, miscarry, and have offspring with birth defects.

The release of this information was explosive, bringing not only the national but also the international media to Love Canal. To advocates of the Love Canal people, this was conclusive proof of the damage of the chemicals- it was the evidence that they had been waiting for to justify the evacuation. To those who were against such an action, it was hype, a poorly administered test which had no control group; to them, the test was an indicator of nothing except poor science. In fact, the test itself became little more than a tool in the hands of the warring parties who were playing to the media.

While the situation was already quite dramatic and garnering a great deal of media attention, the LCHA pressed forward, knowing that although the battle might have been won, tipping the balance of sympathy in their favor, the war continued. On May 19, 3 days after the release of the tests, after an angry mob had gathered outside of the LCHA headquarters, the LCHA took two EPA officials hostage, saying that "if we are going to be left here to die, so will they." This move showed the extreme situation that the people were in, and the distance that they were willing to go to attain their goal. This move also got even more media attention, and put a great deal of pressure-political on President Carter who was running for re-election, to resolve the crisis quickly. On May 21, he gave in to the pressure, declaring a health emergency at Love Canal. On October 1, 1980, a month before the presidential election, he signed a bill authorizing the permanent evacuation of all families at Love Canal. The reason that he gave was not because of "imminent danger"- as it had been for inner-ring families, but because of "mental anguish." The federal government worked out an arrangement with the State of New York, authorizing the release of \$15 million to resolve the crisis- \$7.5 of which would be in the form of loans to be re-paid, and \$7.5 million in grant-direct aid.

## Chapter 3:

### Review of the Dominant Literature: Evidence of the Myth

In this chapter, I will analyze the dominant literature, which is composed of the most widely read and frequently cited books that present the popular account of the Love Canal "story". The centerpiece of my analysis will be Dr. Adeline Levine's 1982 book, Love Canal: Science, People and Politics because it is the most comprehensive text. I will also review My Life by Lois Gibbs, its Introduction written by Dr. Levine's husband, Arthur, and the Environmental Reporter article "Love Canal: A Retrospective", paying attention to the various aspects of the myth which is emphasized by each of these works. In addition, I will analyze coverage of Love Canal that appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Niagara Gazette.

Because the work of Adeline and Arthur Levine figures so prominently in the Love Canal literature, it is important to mention something about them. Not only are the Levines academics, but also witnesses of events, and close personal friends of Lois Gibbs. A sociology professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo, Dr. Adeline Levine went to Love Canal in 1978, days after the health emergency was declared. Because she became "hooked" or obsessed with events there, Levine organized a field-research seminar with graduate students, aiming to "find out everything (she) could." (Levine, 3) The group's methods of research included interviewing victims, visiting the Love Canal area frequently, and attending all public meetings and events. The sources of material for her book include interviews with 61 families, 30 state task force members, and other "key people", as well as notes from her field work, and newspaper and magazine articles. Although she does not explain further, she states she used "standard sociological conceptions" in order to "make sense of the experiences of Love Canal." (Levine, 5) Dr. Levine's husband, Arthur Levine, collaborated with Gibbs writing My Life, and he wrote the Introduction. The couple became very important to Gibbs, and she wrote "They have helped me in many ways....I will always be grateful to both of them for their support, encouragement and the love that they have given me during the past three years. (Gibbs, X).

#### Demographics and Housing Type

From the first page of her book, Levine speaks about the victims as homeowners. When she speaks of the "citizens" of Love Canal, she attaches herself to their homeowner status, leaving out the 800 renters who lived at the Canal. Her limited definition gives the impression that all the citizens there were homeowners, or that only homeowners were citizens. In addition, when Levine describes something, she usually refers only to homeowners. When she illustrates the problem of leaching chemicals, for example, she writes, "the chemicals had been moving through the grounds and neat lawns right into the basements of the homes that lined the shady streets", ignoring the fact that they also moved into the basement of the LaSalle Housing Development where residents did laundry. When she describes the area, she

writes of, “abandoned homes, with boarded up windows and overgrown yards” (Levine, 7) not even mentioning the LaSalle Housing Development. In fact, she doesn’t give any specific information about the LaSalle Housing Development until the end of the book, reinforcing the impression that the renters were on the periphery of the crisis.

While Levine and Gibbs at least mention the renters at some point, the Environmental Reporter does not mention either the renters or the housing development at all. Like the other accounts, non specific information is given at the beginning about the population affected, or housing type and composition of the neighborhood. Instead of giving an overview of the Love Canal population, the Environmental Reporter article presents Love Canal events by giving an account of Lois Gibbs’ story. Using Gibbs’ experience of “housewife-turned-activist” as a case-study the article suggests that hers is the typical resident’s experience at Love Canal. Although the article states that “the Love Canal crisis shows the human effects of pollution”, in reality it shows the effects on a specific social group, predominantly white homeowners.

### **Treatment of the Renter Population**

The works of the dominant literature either completely omit the renters, as the Environmental Reporter article does, or mention the renters briefly, usually at the end of the work. Although Levine does present some information about renters, both her method and timing reinforces the perception of renters as somehow insignificant. Most of the specific information Levine presents about renters does not come until the end of the book. In fact, the existence of LaSalle Housing Development and the subject of the “the tenants in the public housing project” is not raised until page 104, half-way through the book. Only on page 196 of the 202 page book does Levine include specific information about them, in a 3 page section entitled, “Renters versus Owners”. In the entire 220 page book, there are only 6 references to the public housing residents, and 6 pages (some overlapping) about renters.

Levine’s treatment of the renters is also characterized by omissions and incomplete information. She gives incomplete information about who the renters were, downplaying the characteristics which made them unique. While she gives a breakdown by race, she doesn’t mention gender or family composition (average family size, percent of single-headed households) or the size of the renter population. These two variables are important because I found that most renter families were single female-headed, with many children. Not only does Levine give incomplete information about the renter population, but also about the proximity of LaSalle to the Canal. This is an important fact as proximity was the basis upon which the first evacuations were made; scientists assumed that exposure was greatest for the residents living closest to the Canal. Levine also omits specific information about the Renters Association, and its goals, tactics and outcome, which I will discuss later.

### **Gibbs as Leader**

Arthur Levine's introduction to My Life and Gibbs' own account of her story best capture the mythic presentation of the LCHA and its leader. Using dramatic language, Arthur Levine depicts Gibbs as a symbol of transcendent woman and inspirational leader. Although Gibbs had been an "ordinary", almost "typical American woman" Levine shows her becoming a heroine "in response to crisis and challenge". Levine portrays her as a fighter for her entire community and country, struggling to assert the rights of citizens to be included in decision making processes. At the same time, he shows her as a compassionate leader, always accessible to her constituents, who phone her "often late at night to share their fears and obtain some hope."

In the estimation of Arthur Levine, Gibbs' story is significant because it teaches some important lessons. First, the success of the LCHA demonstrates that "ordinary citizens can be heard". Second, it illustrates important issues about the relationships "between citizens and their government and experts". Third, Gibbs' exceptional leadership enabled the LCHA to become, "the most successful single-cause grass-roots movement of our time" (Gibbs, xv); their story became inspirational to others fighting for justice.

Gibbs picks up on Levine's treatment, and presents her story as a parable which can be used to guide others facing similar challenges. Saying, "I want to tell you our story- my story- because I believe that ordinary citizens.... can influence solutions to important problems in our society" (Gibbs, 1), Gibbs suggests that her story illustrates some generally applicable lessons. Specifically, she suggests that her work reveals the way to influence government to be more fair. She and others say that her story shows the importance of not only "challenging" government, but of fighting, "in order to survive as a democratic society". Her battle at Love Canal gains mythic significance and she becomes a modern-day warrior.

Although Dr. Adeline Levine accepts this mythic portrayal of Gibbs, her work includes description of some events which contradict the mythic depiction; although she describes them, she also mis-interprets them. The following incident, for example, shows Gibbs was not a leader of the entire Love Canal area, but of homeowners,

On the day after the tumultuous meeting of February 8, any shred of belief that the people may have maintained that the decisions were based exclusively on the scientific data were seriously undercut. They read in the newspapers that the relocation recommendation had been changed to include people in the area to the *west* of the inner rings, the area including the tenants in the public housing project, for whom no data had been analyzed. (104)

What is very clear from this incident is Gibbs' lack of concern for the welfare of the renters. The LCHA's protest of a policy including renters shows that the renters were not part of their constituency, or potential partners or allies. If they had been, the LCHA would not have protested a decision benefiting pregnant renters and their children. Rather, the LCHA would have questioned why the renters' health data had not been analyzed until many months after the homeowners had been, and they would have protested the

delay . Gibbs' response not only doesn't demonstrate concern , but it also suggests that rather than having a cooperative attitude, Gibbs and the LCHA viewed the renters more like adversaries.

Gibbs protests the inclusion of renters by presenting Governor Carey with children's coffins. This action was taken, ostensibly to protest the fact that the decisions made at Love Canal were made for political reasons, not because of scientific reasons. Levine had previously shown that Gibbs realized this, in the section entitled, "Learning There is a Political Game." She also shows that Gibbs was becoming increasingly adept at playing this game. Her protest of this political game- when she herself was a player- is therefore, rather ironic. As is the fact that she took children's coffins to illustrate her point. The government made the decision to include pregnant women and young children because of the high miscarriage and birth defect rates among women living in close proximity to the dump. Had they not been re-located, therefore, perhaps many renters' unborn children would have died. Gibbs' choice of symbolism is startling, suggesting that the renters' gain could result in homeowners' children's death. She did not see that if renters were denied rights to re-location, which the homeowners enjoyed, their children would die. Levine did not pick up on the irony of the protest or of Gibbs' choice of symbolism. It's as if she simply accepts Gibbs' words.

Rather than questioning the larger significance of the LCHA's protest of renter gains, Levine accepts Gibbs' questionable explanation. Although few decisions made at Love Canal were based on scientific data, Levine doesn't consider other reasons for Gibbs' protest of this particular issue. Perhaps the LCHA protest was a way to demonstrate the LCHA's ability to attract media attention and to put adverse pressure on the government when decisions not favorable to the LCHA were made, or if government rewarded other groups- or tried to serve them as well. Levine's reference to the LCHA members as "the people" and to the renters as "tenants" may be indicative of her own bias. Clearly, her language shows that she interprets events from the perspective of the homeowners.

Levine's acceptance of Gibbs' interpretation of events is also shown later when she says that Gibbs tried to be helpful to renters on numerous occasions. Even after the previous example of Gibbs' action, Levine says Gibbs tried to initiate contact and cooperate with the renters,

"Gibbs made efforts to include the project residents in the Housing Development..... Gibbs and Cerillo, at different time, tried to assist the LaSalle groups and tried to interest them in joining with the association. (198)"

She gives no specific information about when Gibbs and Cerillo made these attempts, or how. If Gibbs reacted by protesting when the renters gained a concession from the government, why would she be interested in joining her group with the renters? Why would she and Cerrillo try to assist the group that they viewed as adversaries? Levine doesn't question whether there was any substance to Gibbs' statements about aiding renters, not does she examine

whether there is a motive behind Gibbs portraying herself as a helper of renters.

In my interviews with the Renters Association leadership, everyone stated that Gibbs did not at any time demonstrate concern for their plight, or manifest an interest in cooperating with them. Nor did she acknowledge the commonalty of some of their interests. On the occasions when she had contact with renters, it was for them to sign petitions; she wanted to benefit from their numbers. Individual leaders told me of numerous occasions when they were informed of LCHA meetings, only to find at the last minute that the time or the location had been changed.

Levine, however, suggests that the renters are to blame for the inability of the two groups to work together, for they "rebuffed" Gibbs. Although Levine does say renters felt the LCHA leadership was only trying to be "self-serving", she neither examines nor considers the possibility that this was true. In addition, Levine never explores in any depth why the adversarial relationship between renters and homeowners existed- or what this reveals about the type of leader Gibbs was and what her interests were.

### **Gibbs and the Government**

Another questionable assertion in the dominant literature is that of Gibbs "battling with government". Indeed, Levine describes an incident suggesting Gibbs was engaged in private negotiation with government which sometimes helped her to accomplish her goals. To protest the Federal FDAA's public release of a revised safety plan before giving her a copy, Gibbs refused to hold a scheduled LCHA meeting (Levine, 53). Levine interprets Gibbs' action as "exercising the power of withholding a resource" - though she does not explain why or how the citizen pressure group was a governmental resource. Gibbs' refusal was so important that as a result, "Matters came to a standstill." The state government's response was to appease Gibbs; Governor Carey visited Love Canal and granted an office and funding for the LCHA. This office was to become a "crucial asset for the organization" which was growing, and it became an important headquarters.

This interaction and Levine's interpretation raise questions. Why would the government be interested in making sure that a citizen's group met to discuss safety plans? Does this indicate that in fact government viewed Gibbs as "part of the team", part of the "strategy" to contain the crisis and the people's response- or to direct it? Was Gibbs promised a part in the decision making process as long as she directed the people's response? Was she made privy to some information in exchange for keeping it secret from the rank-and-file membership? Why would the government want a meeting to occur at which a rancorous subject would be brought up unless they had received some kind of assurance about how the discussion would be directed? Was Gibbs angry because she had made some kind of agreement with the government that she would direct the discussion in a certain way- break or diffuse the conflict- as long as certain concessions were made to her? Was the granting of an office a way to cement a partnership of sorts? I will explore these questions more fully in the following chapters.

As there is a difference between what Levine infers and what she reveals, there are a series of contradiction in Gibbs' description of events at Love Canal . Although in some instances, she protests government actions , in others she shows the "special relationship" she developed with government officials. Throughout the crisis for example, Gibbs met privately with officials. In the early phases of the crisis, Gibbs met every Friday at her home with state representatives Matt Murphy and John Daly. Writing that they gave her advice while she "kept them informed", it sounds as though they had some sort of relationship of mutual assistance and a closeness which is in marked contrast to that existing between renters and government. Not only did this relationship sometimes influence her actions, but it also contributed to her becoming the leader of the LCHA; it also raises some questions about what kind of a leader she was.

In other sections, Gibbs describes incidents which suggest that she functioned as a liaison between government and residents. Not only did she speak daily with Commissioner of Health Vianna, (Gibbs, 63), but she also worked with the state and the people "to set up relocation reviews." (Gibbs, 119) The type of interaction that she had with political figures was essential to her mode of operation and to the image she fostered. At one point, she wanted to hang up a protest banner at a meeting but she didn't, saying, " it would have hurt my credibility after I had the private meeting with the governor." (Gibbs, 115) Clearly, fostering a special relationship with powerful political figures- to open channels of negotiation were central to her success. These facts suggest that it is necessary to re-examine whether or not Gibbs was an autonomous grass-roots leader. A grassroots leader is one who is accountable to her/his constituents and who involves them in all aspects of decision making. Rather than perceiving themselves as a representative to government, rather than censoring one's beliefs to avoid developing an adversarial relationship with government, the grassroots leader is completely honest in dealings with the government and their group. The type of leader that Gibbs was, her strategies and ways of operating influenced the type of organization that the LCHA became.

#### **Depiction of the Love Canal Homeowners Association**

Although Levine calls the LCHA a "true grassroots organization" (208), she includes some information which suggests otherwise. Even though Levine shows Gibbs' tight control over the LCHA, and the fact that she often directed more than facilitated, negotiated with government rather than taking direct action, Levine does not question the degree to which the LCHA was autonomous and truly "of the people". Levine's description of an internal LCHA struggle from October 1978 to November 1979 raises questions about how the rank and file members of the LCHA participated in the organizing. Some members opposed Gibbs' power and wanted to develop more collective decision making (Levine, 202). Rather than emphasizing negotiation with government, the discontented LCHA members wanted to use more "direct-action techniques" to achieve their goal. In the next chapter, I will examine this issue in greater detail.



### **Treatment of the Renters Association (RA)**

Although the other dominant accounts almost completely ignore the renters, both Gibbs and Levine mention the Renters Association (RA), though they omit and distort some important information. Levine, for example, fails to identify the different stages in the RA's development. Instead, she says that: "the RA had problems from the beginning in carrying out its chosen task" (Levine, 97) because another group, the Concerned Area Residents, split members. Levine neither acknowledges the fact that the renters did become well-organized over time nor considers the factors which contributed to their perceived failure. Rather than examining the interactions between renters and government officials, Levine says that government tried to "assist and support" the organizing efforts of renters- another fact not born out by my research. Her characterization makes it seem that internal- not external forces- made the renters less powerful than homeowners.

Other statements reveal her incomplete knowledge of renters and their organizing history. Trying to explain some of the reasons for the Renter Association's failure to become a "major power at Love Canal" (Levine, 199), Levine says that residents were afraid to "fight government" because they were dependent on public assistance. This statement is incorrect, ignoring the tactics of Renters Association leaders who fought government from the beginning of the crisis. It also ignores the recent history of LaSalle and especially, residents successful 1970 organizing campaign to rid LaSalle of a disrespectful and rude Manager. Renters were neither timid nor afraid to protest government; Levine's statement misleads readers.

Another distortion is her perpetuation of the idea that the renters and homeowners had fundamentally different interests. Emphasizing the differences between the two groups more than the similarities, she interprets the struggle between homeowner as inevitable- when it wasn't. According to Levine, renters were less effective because they did not have the issue of property binding them. Renters were only concerned with "health" and whether it was "safe to remain where they were." (Levine, 197). While homeowners did have some different concerns, renters and homeowners also shared a common interest in maintaining a high "quality of life" and in protecting their health and well-being. She does not at any time explore the possibility that the renters may have had other reasons for focusing on this theme- such as different values, different leaders and different ways of organizing their community.

### **Citizens Victorious**

In the dominant accounts, the final settlement is viewed as proof of the citizens' success. Because government agreed to buy homeowners' homes, Gibbs states, "To a great extent, we won our fight" (Gibbs, 1) , and Levine reinforces the citizens "victory." Although she is only speaking about the homeowners, her statement implies that all residents were successful, when in fact, renters were not. In spite of the exclusion of the renters from the settlement, Gibbs still says that the LCHA's victory demonstrates the power of the "little guy":

We're not little people! We're the big people who vote them in. We have the power, they don't! (209, Levine).

In fact, one wonders from the resolution of this crisis if the "little guy"- the least powerful economically and politically- did win. She also does not at any time raise the theme of "injustice"- nor mention the fate of the renters, and how incomplete the settlement was- rewarding the wealthier, more powerful group, at the expense of the others. She also talks about the fact that Love Canal is not an isolated incident but "the tip of the iceberg". Although she mentions the fact that there was some dissent among Congress people about the fact that Superfund compensated victims for property loss rather than damage to health, Levine does not tie this to the way that the Love Canal crisis was resolved, nor to the injustice of the settlement. Because she doesn't show that one group- the homeowners- were compensated for property loss and health damage, while another group- the renters- were not, there is no connection to the way that the national Superfund legislation was written, which compensates victims for property but not health damage.

### **The Environmental Story: Causes of the Dumping and the US Army's Role**

Although Gibbs states definitively (p. 3) that the US Army did dump in the Canal, and Levine is vague about this, both authors fail to attach any significance to this issue. In fact, no dominant authors explore what the issue implies about government responsibility and culpability. Gibbs backtracks later, saying that the only evidence of Army dumping is the recollection of the "old timers". Levine only raises the subject on two different pages of the book, neither proving or disproving it. Although her book was published in 1982- 2 years after Michael Zweig's extensive investigation into this subject for the New York State Assembly, she does not cite his book or any of his findings.

This vague treatment of the Army dumping coincides with the dominant authors' treatment of the dumping, failing to place it in historical context. Although Levine, for example, mentions the fact that Love Canal is a symbol of the widespread regional and national problem of chemical contamination, she links the problem to the production of "industrial products"- not to the development of military technologies. In doing so, she ignores the economic and political forces which shaped the region at that point, influencing the use of the canal as a dump. Indeed, Levine does not mention either the fact that most of the wastes were generated in the production of war materials or that Manhattan project wastes are believed to be buried in the Canal by the author of the New York State Assembly report on Love Canal. Levine and the other dominant writers attach no significance to either the time period within which the dumping was occurring- which marked the entrenchment of the chemical and defense industries in the area, or the fact that 60-70% of Hooker production during this period was to fulfill government defense contracts. The result of this treatment is that evidence that would have implicated the federal government, compelling it to

assume financial and administrative responsibility for the crisis- was discounted and downplayed.

### **How the Dominant Texts Assess Blame: Who's Responsible for the Crisis?**

The dominant writers, particularly Gibbs and Levine, absolve the military of their rightful responsibility. Ignoring the fact that a series of governmental decisions allowed for the construction of the 99th Street School and for the residential development of the area, they fail to show that the crisis occurred not only because of careless dumping but also because of the complex web of governmental decisions. Levine mentions these different pieces of information, but does not tie them coherently together, ignoring the fact that while there were different actors, many of them had governmental power, resources and responsibility.

In the Environmental Reporter (1984, 840) article, Gibbs and Levine similarly absolve the Board of Education, portraying Hooker as the only culprit. Both women- who share the same perspective, interestingly enough, say that the Board of Education officials were not "expert enough" to understand the danger presented by the buried wastes. Gibbs justifies her stance by saying, "The board of education and the city fathers are like physical education teachers; they're not industrial hygienists." Although Gibbs and Levine depict the city officials as naive lay-people, they ignore the fact that the lay-people knew enough not to inform homeowners about the dump for fear of not selling homes. Although Gibbs and Levine emphasize the need to heed warnings, they simplify the actions of the city officials, saying "they just sort of ignored the warning, like we ignore so many warnings." (Environmental Reporter, 837) This position simplifies the complex web of decisions which led to the creation of the Love Canal crisis. It also raises questions about why Gibbs and Levine have the same position on this point. Why would they absolve the Board of Education? Why do they simplify a very complex situation? Why do they absolve the government and local agencies and make Hooker the sole culprit? Gibbs is portrayed as being the "fighter" against government- why does she here defend government against business interests? What are her motivations? What contributed to her changing her stance?

### **The Environmental Significance of Love Canal**

Although most of Levine's book focuses on the Love Canal story, in the final chapters of the book, she briefly discusses the fact that Love Canal "has become a symbol" of the 215 waste disposal sites in the Niagara-Erie County alone. Although her treatment of the crisis makes it seem that Love Canal was an isolated event, Levine suggests at the end of her book that Love Canal is an indicator of a more widespread regional and national problem. In fact, Levine says that the story of the crisis at Love Canal has become a 'legend' and symbolic event. The legend is focused on the health and environmental issues. According to Levine, the legend, "promotes powerful interests and only hurts apparently unimportant ones. (Levine, 170)" Those hurt are the residents who have no specific information about the damage

done to their health, and the US population, which is misled by the “miracle at Love Canal” to believe that toxic chemicals aren’t really a major threat. While government minimizes the hazard, emphasizing that the remediation removed any danger, Gibbs and other Love Canal residents assert that the chemicals present a long-term threat.

Although Levine identifies the legend, she also participates in creating another legend or myth by omitting and distorting the story and fate of the least powerful group at Love Canal. As Gibbs organized the most powerful group, Levine wrote about them. She also fails to show some of the other larger ramifications of the legend- such as the way that the 1980 Superfund bill was drafted which compensates victims for damage to property rather than health. Indeed, her inadequate attention to the renters’ plight prevents her from seeing the other layers of the legend- such as the injustices perpetuated because of the way the crisis was resolved. Not only did the settlement compensate the most powerful at the expense of the predominantly female, poor and Black renters, it also left unresolved some of the most central issues, such as whether the Canal should be rehabited. Because the issue of health was not central, the government was able to design environmental tests to show that 2/3 of the evacuated area at Love Canal was “habitable”, indicating that chemicals have been “contained” and the clean-up successful, making it possible to move people back to Love Canal.

### **Lessons of the Love Canal Story**

The story that Levine chooses to tell about Love Canal- the information she reveals and obscures-- leads her to identify a series of “lessons” which are ways to give significance to events. Focusing on the LCHA leads Levine to draw the conclusion “We must take seriously the idea of countervailing forces and self-interest” (Levine, 218). Had she included more than cursory information about the Concerned Residents Association or the Renters Association, perhaps her conclusion would have been different. As I will show in the next chapter, both groups tried to accomplish their goals directly, without relying on informal channels of negotiation- either because they didn’t want to, or they couldn’t.

### **Media Accounts of the Story**

My analysis of media coverage focused on the New York Times, both because it is considered a “national” newspaper, and because it gave more coverage to the crisis than other papers because Love Canal is in New York state. From my analysis, I found that there were three distinctive phases of coverage: initial (1978), end of crisis (Spring, 1980), and post-crisis/retrospective (post-1980). There are also three major types of articles: informational (covering events as they occurred), human interest (describing the victims’ plight), and editorial (commentary/analysis of the issues).

I found that the mythic story of Love Canal appeared mostly in the retrospective period which wiped away mention of the renters and the existence of the LaSalle Development. The story that was reported as events were unfolding- the informational pieces--included the renters and reported

on their plight, the unequal treatment they received and their difficulty with the homeowners.

In the initial period, there were many informational articles covering the crisis in the Times, and investigating the extent of regional environmental problems. In December, 1978 for example, a series of articles revealed that the Love Canal was not the only dangerous toxic waste site in the article, "Three Chemical Dump Sites in Niagara Falls Larger and Potentially More Dangerous than Love Canal". In this period, not only did the Times look at Love Canal as an isolated occurrence but as an indicator of a larger problem; many articles traced Hooker Chemical Company's other dumps nation-wide. Although some articles in the initial period mentioned the residents- though only homeowners- the focus was on events.

During the second period of intensive coverage at the end of the crisis, the Times articles mentioned renters. They were not ignored or excluded from press accounts as the crisis was unfolding. Indeed, some of the most important informational articles written in May, 1980 added information about them, such as the May 23, 1980, "Love Canal Residents Confused on U.S. Action". Other articles, such as the May 23 article, "Carey Proposes Buying Houses at Love Canal", include quotes by renters about unequal treatment; other articles showed their antipathy to the LCHA.

In addition to including renters in the informational stories, the Times also ran a human interest story about the renters' plight on May 23, 1980, entitled, "For Love Canal Renters, the 'Project' is a Prison". This article gives specific information about the location of the Development, its proximity to the Canal- "100 yards away"- and the racial and class background of the renters. Showing unequal treatment, reporter Josh Barbanell wrote that "the families in the development were initially excluded from a state evacuation plan". Introducing the topic of racism, Barbanell describes the "tension" between renters and homeowners, and quotes Mrs. Herbert's assertion that "racism" was the cause. His inclusion of data about the renters- that "about 80 percent of the families in the development are black" -bolster Herbert's argument. Though he mentions the antipathy between renters and homeowners, he concludes that the two had similar problems as both were "trapped" at Love Canal.

Though the Times included renters in its informational articles, the renters received different treatment than homeowners. Many articles, such as the May 23 Times article, "Carey Proposes Buying Houses at Love Canal" only include one or two paragraphs about renters and much more on homeowners. Other articles, such as the May 23, 1980 Washington Post, "President Declares State of Emergency at N.Y. Dump Site", only include a few sentences about renters at the end. The article's title also shows that though the article isn't exclusively on homeowners, they are the primary focus.

Although the media did not completely exclude information about the renters, they gave less press to them than to homeowners during the second period of major press coverage. Many of the stories of this time were human

interest stories, describing the affects of the crisis on residents. Except for the story on the renters plight, homeowners were the exclusive subjects of all of the human interest stories of this time. Even though most of these stories were about subjects that could have included renters, they did not. Articles such as the May 26, 1980 "How Love Canal Mothers Became a Political Force", and the June 9, 1980 article, "Love Canal is Extra Tough on Children" and the May 19, 1980 article, "Love Canal Families are Left With a Legacy of Pain and Anger" focus exclusively on homeowners.

The complete omission of the renters and their plight begins in the period following the crisis' resolution, when articles re-count the history of the crisis. In the May 21, 1980 article, "Peaceful Vigil Resumed at Love Canal", an included chronology of significant events at Love Canal omits any mention of renters or the LaSalle Housing Development. The development of the neighborhood describes the construction of, "modest single-family houses" omitting mention of LaSalle. While the map of the Love Canal area accompanying the "Vigil" article does point out the Housing Development, it is missing in later maps. In the 1981 retrospective article, "Many From Love Canal Still Unsettled", LaSalle is absent, as is any information about the renters. The existence of the renters or of LaSalle Development is hinted at in reports reconstructing the events of the crisis. This is shown in the chronology written during the end of the crisis, showing that even in the period when renters receive coverage in informational pieces, they get dropped once the Love Canal crisis is put in a historical light. Other articles which do not review the Love Canal history but are written after 1980, such as the February 14, 1981, "Many From Love Canal Still Unsettled" also delete information about the renters. Though this story was written only months after the crisis' resolution, the LaSalle Development disappears from the attached map of the Love Canal area, as though it never existed.

The patterns revealed by the review of news reports both confirm and disconfirm the existence of the myth. The inclusion of renters in the informational stories and in one human interest story shows that they were not completely ignored by either the media or the government when the crisis was occurring and being settled. Because information about the renters was made available, some sense of the diversity of the population and housing type was captured by the media. Rather than portraying Gibbs as a community-wide leader, a number of articles showed both the existence of other citizens' organizations and the antipathy that existed between them and the LCHA. Though some articles called Gibbs a "grass-roots leader", many showed her special relationship with government, and her close contact with high-level officials. The articles also clearly show that the renters felt that they had been treated unjustly and that they were not "victorious". In the initial stages of the crisis, the media also uncovered the extensive problem of toxic waste contamination in Niagara Falls, though they focused only on the current problem, never looking at it in a historic light.

This review of media coverage also shows that there was a great change between the informational pieces written at the end of the crisis and the

retrospective pieces. Information included and the way that it is transmitted in historic articles about Love Canal story is different. The renters and LaSalle Development disappear, making it seem that Love Canal was exclusively a neighborhood of single-family homes. The disappearance of the renters from the story makes it easier to portray Gibbs as a community-wide crusader. The resolution of the crisis shows that citizens are "victorious" in their battle with government. Although Love Canal is often referred to as a "symbol" of toxic waste problems, in the retrospective articles, it is often depicted as a singular, somehow isolated event, in part because little or not information is included about the serious, regional problem of toxic waste contamination.

A "story" is told in these retrospective articles that illustrates the meaning of events there. Labeling the LCHA a "grass-roots" organization and Gibbs a fighter against government, this story gives the impression that citizens can triumph against government, making it be accountable to ordinary people. It communicates the message that "justice can be done." Omitting information about the renters means that there is an absence of those elements of the true Love Canal story that would contest this- about the fact that the poorest citizens--the group made up primarily of women, children and Blacks- got no justice, have no resources to seek medical care for their ailments, and no access to information to help them to detect early warning signs for themselves and their children.

The mythic story contained not only in some of the media coverage but also in the other dominant texts suggests that the "oppressed"- the blue-collar, uneducated homeowners- could overcome. In the mythic story, there is also little mention about the uncertainty about the health issues- about the lack of research, the lack of follow-up, the refusal of the state government to give up information gathered from the health data- making it seem that there were no serious health problems, making it easier for the government to re-settle the area. The lack of information is taken as signifying an "absence" of problems, instead of an absence of information. The true health and environmental problems of the Niagara area and the Love Canal area remain buried.

## Chapter. 4:

### The Anti-Myth

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the alternative literature, challenging the premises of the myth and adding information about the renters and the scope of the environmental problems. The books, reports and articles making up the alternative literature are little known and infrequently cited; none of the dominant writers cite any of them or include information they present in their bibliographies. Michael Zweig's 1980 report, The Federal Connection: A History of US Military Involvement in the Toxic Contamination of Love Canal and the Niagara Frontier Region, places the Love Canal tragedy in a larger regional context, challenging the treatment and presentation of the environmental story told in the dominant literature. Martha Lewis' report, "Managing the Benefits Packages for Renters At Love Canal" reveals the plight and treatment of the renters and presents new information about the Renters Association. L. Gardner Shaw's article, "Citizen Participation at Love Canal" analyzes the negotiation between government and citizens and shows that renters and others played a lesser role than the LCHA. Shaw's article also sheds new light on the relationships and interactions between the LCHA and the other citizen groups. Some sections of Lois Gibbs' book are also included here for they support the claims of the anti-myth.

I will also present new information I collected from interviews and data about the renters. In the Fall of 1994, I interviewed the leaders of the three citizen organizations, including the Renters Association, the Concerned Area Renters and the LCHA; the renters' advocates and advisors, and the Executive Director of the Niagara Falls Housing Authority. In addition, The Niagara Falls Housing Authority released to me data about the renters from the years 1976- 1985. Collected from the yearly HUD re-examination form of low-income renters, this data revealed important characteristics of gender and family composition. The HUD form 41245 allows me to get a more complete picture of who the renters were, and what characteristics are most important in describing them as a group. This chapter is organized along the lines of the three major categories of the myth: the story of the crisis, its outcome, and the scope of the environmental problems.

#### **There Weren't Only Homeowners at Love Canal: Specific Information about the Renters**

All of the works mentioned above add some important information about the renters and the LaSalle Housing Development, showing that the population of the Love Canal area was more diverse than reported in the dominant literature. Lewis' report and my data give information about the specific attributes of the renter population. According to Lewis, not only did renters "tend to be poorer than the homeowners" but many were also welfare recipients (Lewis, 5). Lewis also states that many renters were single-mothers, a fact never mentioned by the dominant writers, adding the dimension of gender to our story. In addition, she emphasizes that "no attention was paid to the fact that there was a large senior citizen population there" (interview).



She also gives information about their racial background, saying that, "there was a large black population in the housing development" (Lewis, 4).

One of the important findings of the HUD re-examination data is that it both corroborates Lewis' observations and adds to the information about the renters. The data is collected yearly by the Niagara Falls Housing Authority in accordance with HUD guidelines and inquires about family income and assistance received, family composition, population composition (based on gender and age), and work status to determine that the client is eligible to live in HUD-sponsored housing. The data verify that 65% of the renters were Black. While Blacks were the majority, there was clearly a significant proportion of Whites at the Development. Many of the dominant texts downplay this fact, suggesting that the population was defined primarily by its racial composition. Perhaps this is because if we look at the Love Canal neighborhood as a whole, most Blacks were renters. Perhaps this was a result of the fact that the important leaders of the Renters Association were Black. Also important is the finding that the proportion of Blacks increased over time; by 1985 when the project was closed, 74% of the remaining renters were Black: most of the people left behind after the settlement were Blacks. Many Black renters said that they had a great deal of difficulty finding adequate housing because of discrimination: racial and gender-oriented. Some also wanted to stay because they didn't want to return to the problems of the inner-city.

While race is an important characteristic, my analysis also reveals that other attributes such as gender, class and family composition are equally or more important in defining the renter families. My findings indicate that in 1978, 80% of renter families were headed by a single-parent, with 77% headed by single-females. This attribute is clearly very important. It shows that despite racial differences, most families were led by single- women. This finding shows that the renters had an important issue in common, binding them to each other. It shows that the typical family was led by a woman, in spite of racial differences. It would seem then, that to give a really complete picture of the renter population, it's necessary to include this information. Interviewing the renters and reading old newspaper clips, I discovered that there was a high degree of racial harmony; perhaps part of this reason was because the renters shared this common experience of raising children alone- and for this reason they had more in common than not.

Another characteristic distinguishing renters was the number of children per family, and the proportion of children in the total renter population. In 1978, the average family size was 4.73 with an average of 3.06 minors. Minors; however, made up a majority of the population. In 1978, there were 618 minors making up 64.7% of the total renter population. While the average number of children per family was 3.06, the range was very great: in 1979 the maximum number of children per family was 14 and the minimum was 1. Mrs. Herbert, the president of the Renters Association, had 13 children when the crisis broke out. This number is significant, for those most at risk from chemical exposure are developing youngsters .

In addition to the striking proportion of single-female headed households, many households received AFDC. In 1978, 67% of the renters were AFDC recipients, indicating that many were poor. This information is important, showing the class diversity of the Love Canal neighborhood. Homeowners have been defined as being predominantly blue-collar workers and low-middle class; the fact that they owned their own homes; however, became an important symbol of the income difference between the two-which may have been slight. This finding suggests that class is an important variable in defining renters and in getting a picture of who they were. Many were poor, living in a blue-collar community that was very suburban.

Taken together, a fuller picture of the renters emerges. At the time that the crisis broke out, a majority of the renter population consisted of children. Most renters lived in families with one parent, usually a mother. The families were large, with the typical family having at least a few children. Most of the families relied on public assistance, and were financially needy. While race has been the most widely-identified variable used by the dominant writers, especially Levine, to define the renters as a group, clearly gender, class, and family structure are equally if not more important in giving a more complete picture of who they were and what attributes most distinguished them.

#### **There Weren't Only Homes at Love Canal: Information about LaSalle Housing Development and Life There**

Not only did the dominant literature present inadequate information about the renters but also about the LaSalle Housing Development. Little is known about the characteristics which made LaSalle unique. First, LaSalle was built to accommodate large families with many children; the average unit had 3.5 bedrooms in 1978, with a range of 2-5. It was the only housing development in Niagara Falls with 4-5 bedrooms (Shaw, 5). Second, it was newly built, completed in 1970. Mrs. Rich described moving into the newly-finished project as the final coat of paint was being applied. In contrast to many housing developments which are old and dilapidated, the condition of LaSalle was excellent. Third, its lay-out differed from the typical high-rise often built in the inner-city; LaSalle was made up of duplexes organized into 12 different "courts" and garden-style elderly housing. Housing specialist Lewis declared that LaSalle "was one of the most beautiful developments that I had ever seen because the apartments were duplexes" (Interview).

The forth characteristic distinguishing LaSalle was its location, leading many housing specialists and renters to call LaSalle the "nicest project in Niagara Falls." Unlike many other housing developments, LaSalle was outside of the city in a suburban, highly-desirable area which had lots of green space. The elderly had garden-style apartments, and the other renters benefited from the open areas surrounding their units. Children could play outside, and renters didn't have to worry about violence and drugs as they did in other housing developments. The area was peaceful, and safe, and the children could play outside in the fields and walk to the elementary school.

In sum, the quality of life for renters at LaSalle was very high compared to other public housing developments. There was a high degree of racial harmony at the Development as well as a strong, supportive community spirit. A tight-knit community, renters were reluctant to leave LaSalle because they knew that the degree of cooperation and community spirit was rare. Mrs. Sanders told me,

We were like a family out there. What affected one, affected everyone. If a family lost their home or was burnt out, everybody came to their aid (Interview).

It was a special place to live for a number of different reasons, including safety, harmony, cooperation among neighbors and new, modern units. To many low-income residents seeking to flee the problems of the inner-city, LaSalle was a haven. Renter Mrs. Rich, said, " I wasn't looking for anything out of Love Canal 'cause God knows I loved where I was living.....I almost cried when they tore down the houses"(Interview).

### **How the Renters Experienced the Crisis (and Why They Organized)**

When analyzing the organizing efforts of the renters, it is necessary to consider the context or background within which they acted. Complex and involving many actors, it was a constantly shifting scene. Considering the development of the Renters Association (RA) over time, it is important to refer back to the general scene and to trace the influence of the most powerful actors: the LCHA and the government. This fact is made dramatically clear by Mrs. Rich's personal story of discovering the existence of the Canal. She had not been notified or personally made aware prior to the August 2nd government announcement which she heard when she was at home watching TV. She recognized the people she was watching as her neighbors:

It was a Sunday afternoon, and I didn't believe it. Well, you was watching the homeowners on TV and that's when I recognized it's over the fence from me, it's across the street, across the lawn from me. And to satisfy my curiosity, I went outside. And there they were. And you feel numb. And you think this is a dream.... it's so long before you recognize that you're in it... It's like, to me as a renters, they were so concerned with the homeowners and the school and Occidental Chemical, that we was just little forgotten people...." (interview)

Mrs. Rich's description of her experience shows dramatically that the renters were outside the scene and the main action. As in a play with supporting cast members waiting behind the curtain, watching the action unfold, she was a minor character looking across the fence at the spectacle involving her neighbors, also involving her. The existence of the fence makes the scene even more dramatic- for it shows that, as there was a political and spiritual divide between the renters and the homeowners, the lead actors and the supporting cast, so there was a physical barrier. She found out vital information about her life and health by watching it played out on a TV set focusing on her neighbors.

The renters were infrequently, if ever, the leading players in the Love Canal drama. In fact, as Mrs. Rich responded to the information by walking

outside to observe the play unfold, renters were often put in that position of watching the LCHA and the government, and then responding. They never had command of the center stage on their own. As Mrs. Rich said, they were, "little forgotten people". Her description demonstrates this, and the fact that they were relegated to this position from the beginning. In order to understand the RA, it is important to always keep sight of the larger context and scene within which they played; for the larger players influenced the renters' fate, forcing them often to respond to events in the larger arena- which often conditioned their response and plan of action.

Mrs. Rich's poignant description of her discovery, was the beginning of the crisis for her and for many of the renters. From the beginning, they were fighting against anonymity and being excluded and ignored by the most powerful actors, including the government, the LCHA and the media. They were fighting to get over the fence, into the central ring, to influence the events that played out there and to take control of their own fate by participating in the decisions made about their lives, as Gibbs wanted to do for herself and her homeowner constituents. Indeed, the necessity of organizing, was double for them- to protect their children- and to keep themselves from being excluded from the process and ultimately trapped at Love Canal (Lewis 4). The organization began because Mrs. Herbert and other renters not only wanted to escape the contamination, but also to counteract their invisibility in the crisis.

#### **How the Renters Association Began**

The renters used a number of different tactics to accomplish their goals. They reached out to organizations and individuals they knew to be sympathetic and powerful politically. Their first organizing step was to contact Assemblyman Arthur Eve of Buffalo, in an effort to get an advocates in government to present their case, and outside assistance to mobilize their community. Eve was prominent throughout the State of New York and a staunch advocate of Black people. He's known for his role in negotiating an end to the uprising at the Attica prison in the 1970's, leading a state voter registration drive, running for Mayor of Buffalo, and owning the largest Black newspaper of the area, The Buffalo Challenger (interview). Even though he wasn't a representative from their district, they appealed to him because they knew that he would help them to get heard. Either the renters recognized that they were being ignored because of their race, or they felt that the best way to get help was to seek advise and support from other Black people- because the whites were ignoring them.

Mrs. Herbert visited Eve's office and told him about events at the Canal- and the exclusion of renters from the plans being made. He visited LaSalle, suggested that the renters canvas LaSalle and hold elections to create their own organization. After electing leaders and formally founding an organization, the renters continued to reach out to people, connecting with the NY State Chapter of the NAACP to lobby legislators to make an allocation for a renters' benefits package.

After Eve helped to organize elections, Mrs. Sarah Herbert and Mrs. Sarah Rich were chosen to be President and Vice-President of the Renters Association (RA). Both were single-mothers, with many children, when the crisis broke out. Mrs. Herbert had 10 children and Mrs. Rich had five. While the LCHA was led by one strong, very visible leader, the RA leadership structure was more collective, with President and Vice-President dividing tasks and guiding the organization. Mrs. Sarah Herbert was the front-line representative, attending meetings and helping to bring the organization into being. Vice-President, Mrs. Sarah Rich, helped to mobilize people and assumed many of the administrative duties. In 1980 when Mrs. Herbert had a heart attack, Mrs. Rich assumed leadership. The Renters Association (RA) was very different from the LCHA in the way it operated, the tactics it used and the goals it enunciated. In addition to using more of a collective approach to leadership, the renters relied on each other and their own techniques, more than government, to help them (Mrs. Rich interview).

Although the dominant writers never even mentioned Herbert's name, most of the alternative texts name and give some information about her. Herbert decided to organize because, "she became frightened by the effects the 'ooze' was having on residents of the housing development and, like Lois Gibbs, decided to take action." (Lewis, 4) Like Gibbs, Herbert was motivated to save her children. Although the two leaders shared many problems, they did not cooperate. In fact, Herbert believes that she was chosen leader partly because of her effectiveness at challenging Gibbs. At an early meeting, Herbert rebelled against Gibbs' control and methods, and told her, "Shut up, Lois. Let me talk" so that she could present the renters' point of view. Directly confronting and disagreeing with Gibbs made Herbert realize, "I'm a Black woman and I can speak my mind." Herbert believes that it was at this point when she asserted her freedom against Gibbs that renters decided to make her president. (Herbert interview).

### **Different Organizing Approach**

The tactics and concern of the RA leaders from that of the LCHA. Each renter I spoke with mentioned that they were concerned with the health of all Love Canal residents- including homeowners- and that the omission of this from the settlement hurt everyone. Perhaps the dynamic that Gibbs was caught in while negotiating with government led her to focus on her group's self-interest- perhaps it is a reflection of her character, leadership, or of the necessities of negotiating with government. Renters like Mrs. Rich were concerned with others' self-interest and well-being- and defined her self-interest more broadly. Even when Mrs. Rich spoke about the poor treatment of renters by homeowners, she acknowledged that the two groups had different interests. In a gentle way she extends understanding and compassion to the homeowners. She also asks for the same treatment in return (interview):

Those homes were beautiful...and then you go and tell them-  
I'm going to give you this amount of dollars and you get out.  
In a sense, we didn't have that problem. But our problem was,

'I came to this place. And I've grown to love this place. I was in love with my place.....So, we, I could understand their problem. And I hope that they could understand ours because I didn't want to go from Love Canal to a dump just because I was a renter.

Mrs. Rich demonstrates her understanding and poignantly fights against demeaning treatment of her group. She is emphasizing the common problems while still acknowledging that there were differences. Mrs. Herbert did the same in our conversations, always returning to the point that all the children were affected by the contamination.

### **Tactics and Goals**

The renters' initial exclusion from tests and governmental plans may account for the approach they took and tactics they used- which differed from the LCHA's. Indeed, the different experiences of both groups and leaders was reflected in the way they attempted to attain their goals. Unlike Gibbs, Herbert did not have illusions about the government, or great expectations that government would "do the right thing". While Gibbs was initially naive and timid, Herbert was more hardened and skeptical about government. Gibbs tried to accommodate government, eagerly meeting with high-level officials such as the Governor and White House officials, feeling extremely timid and in awe of the officials' power. Herbert and the renters took a different approach. Extremely suspicious of government, the renters were combative directly challenging governmental decisions. While Gibbs protested the lack of safety plans by threatening to not hold an LCHA meeting about safety plans, the renters sought a court injunction to prevent the remediation project from beginning until they were evacuated. While Gibbs negotiated, the renters demanded. While Gibbs attended important meetings at the White House, the Renters Association sought a court injunction. Gibbs cooperated while Herbert challenged.

Their main concern throughout the crisis was health. Mrs. Rich outlined the 5 major concerns of the organization about health. First, renters were concerned with getting adequate follow-up care; the failure to get this still bothers her today, for "if some kids was affected, all kids was affected" (Rich interview). Second, she wanted information about diseases she was at a higher risk of developing "to know what to expect in the future", and the early warning signs. Third, she thought that residents deserved specific answers and analysis of their medical records, "an accurate..active result for the tests that were taken" by government. Expressing a lot of worry about her children and the future generation's health and development, she was eager to have government take preventive measures. The desire to learn from specialists what precautions and preventive measures residents could take was the fourth concern Rich identified, and one of the major shortcomings of the settlement effected with government.

To achieve the goal of protecting their health, the renters recognized the necessity of being evacuated in a manner that would be financially feasible for them, and they came up with a series of demands which they

presented to government in October 1980. The demands centered on some realities they wanted government to acknowledge, and on the forms that the compensation should take, including financial and service provisions. Before laying out the demands, the renters wanted government to recognize that evacuation from Love Canal would cause, "economic and social hardships" for renters. Not only was this important tactically in the negotiation, but it also shows that renters wanted to be treated as stakeholders, as residents who would be hurt financially because of Love Canal. The other provisions they demanded include the desire that government set aside \$500,000 of the Love Canal appropriations, "to be used to aid the relocation of tenants." In addition, they requested specific relocation expenses, and continued maintenance of the Renter Association office. In addition to discussing financial matters, they also requested services, such as the training of advocates to help them to find, "safe, sanitary, decent housing (Lewis, A-1). They also directed government to adhere to and enforce "all State, Federal, Civil Rights Laws and Housing Law".

The main battlefield of citizens and government was the negotiation process in which allocative decisions were made. Although there has been some written about the negotiation between renters and government in Shaw's article, more has been written about the LCHA's negotiation. The dominant writers do not differentiate between the two settlements, and says that all citizens were "victorious", an illusion which is shattered upon examining the renters' benefits package.

### **The Negotiation and Settlement**

Much of the alternative literature points to the "ignoring" of the renters- to their unequal treatment- and the effect this had on the final outcome. Many of the alternative writers attribute the invisibility of the renters to different actors. Mr. Eve and Mrs. Lewis believed that the government- "the power"- ignored the renters. Mr. Eve emphasized the failure of government to make provisions for the renters.

To my amazement, they (the government) had no plans for these people: no moving expenses, no utility payments, no stoves and no refrigerators. They were in the project, and if they moved out, they weren't gonna get them (new stoves and refrigerators)...You know, they were selling homes all around them and they were going to let these people stay there. (interview)

Although the state government made arrangements for the homeowners, no policy had been formulated for the renters.

Other alternate writers, such as Shaw and Murth, point to the media's role for portraying the homeowners as the "real victims". My research also revealed that there was disproportionate press coverage given to the LCHA; though press accounts did not completely omit the renters, they only mentioned them in certain periods, often at the end of articles. Only once did I find that renters were the main subject of a New York Times or Washington Post article. All human interest stories focused exclusively on the homeowners and excluded renters.

Some of the other written accounts and interviews concerning the renters suggest they were not only "ignored" by the press and government, but also excluded by the LCHA. Although dominant writers such as Levine do not indicate this is true, Levine shows the LCHA protesting policy decisions that included the renters. The leadership of the RA told me they were excluded by the LCHA in a number of different ways. First of all, both Mrs. Rich and Mrs. Herbert told me that on certain instances they were informed that there were LCHA meetings at a given site at a given time, only to discover that the information given them was wrong, "that the meeting had been moved" or the time changed without warning or notification. This example suggests that the LCHA not only did not want to collaborate with the RA, but they also wanted to give the impression of trying to include them.

When renters did attend LCHA meetings, or general community-wide meetings, they were treated very badly and told to "shut up" and to leave by homeowners. Newspaper accounts and my interviews document the mistreatment of renters. Saying it was still painful to speak about, Mrs. Herbert said she remains puzzled by the homeowners' behavior

First time we went to a meeting with homeowners, they were screaming at us, "Shut up- You're a renters. You can go whenever you want." They didn't give the peoples the chance to talk. (interview)

Emphasizing how badly she was treated, Mrs. Herbert said, "We were all human beings- but they didn't treat us like that." Homeowners also attacked renters because some were AFDC recipients, and they told Mrs. Herbert, "You people are on welfare- someone is paying for you- you're already getting something. You aren't entitled to more."

The renters were excluded in other ways and at other times as well. Although the federal government provided the funding for re-location, the state Revitalization Agency had the power to allocate it. The question of representation of citizens in this process was raised; the citizens groups battled for the right to be included in the Agency; other questions of access and participation were raised in less formal ways- but the more important question is how the different groups influenced the decisions and participated in making them. According to the renters, their advocates, and the alternative literature, the LCHA had a great deal of influence- disproportionately so- and used it to secure more money for their group at the expense of the others. Thus the renters were excluded not only from the organizing efforts of the LCHA, but from the decision-making processes for allocation of benefits. They had fewer chances to represent themselves and lesser access to the power and participation in the decision making process than Gibbs did.

Shaw shows that the LCHA had greater access to government than the other groups, a point re-affirmed by other sources as well. Shaw's article shows that the other citizen groups perceived the LCHA as getting more attention, and that "they exercised more influence on decisions than the other groups felt was appropriate." (11) According to Shaw, on two occasions the LCHA was given the ability to participate in decision making processes



before other groups- or where others were excluded. Shaw suggests; however, that it would be difficult to trace the LCHA's influence on outcomes because most of it was exerted through "informal channels." (Shaw, 19) This is borne out by the fact that all of the decisions made about compensation benefited Gibbs and her group, at the expense of the community as a whole.

All of these interactions combined to create a dynamic and a context within renters struggled to get compensation. Lewis' report shows that there were distinctly different stages in the renter- government negotiation process. In the first stage, the government appeased the renters by giving the impression that it would fulfill all of their demands. Government agreed to assign Martha Lewis, Deputy Commissioner of the NY State Department of Social Services, to Love Canal to help renters manage the benefits package. State government officials sent her to Love Canal with a message for renters: that all their demands but one would be fulfilled.

In the second phase, the government back-tracked, telling Lewis that the promised \$500,000 was not in place. According to Lewis, a complicated dynamic then developed between her, the renters, government officials in the Task Force and at the Department of Social Services who controlled the money and decided the final guidelines. According to her, the government tried to use her to deceive the renters. Hers was a "fake assignment" (Lewis, 10) aimed at mollifying residents and giving the impression that government was serving renters; in her words a ploy to satisfy "public opinion without any substance." The truth of her statement is illustrated by the government's broken promises which undercut her position with the renters- inhibiting the establishment of trust for those she was to advocate for. Lewis is particularly concerned with the fact that the renters were not treated in an honest way by the officials, and she laments the fact that, "the renters were erroneously led to believe that all except one of their demands were met." (interview) The result of the broken promise was far-reaching in Lewis' estimation, leading to "the total erosion of the renters' initial position." (Lewis, 7).

Following the withdrawal of the promise final terms were made for the renters' benefits package in the third stage of the negotiation. According to Lewis, what occurred was "the strange revamping of the package all within welfare and section 8 guidelines" (interview). Lewis says that the final settlement, "was so distilled from the original demands that they were hardly recognizable." (Lewis, 9) While one of the demands was that advocates of the renters would receive special training to assist them in locating housing, the final settlement "permitted tenants to seek housing outside the area" (Lewis, A-4) and "encouraged (them)" to do so "on their own". While one of the demands was the setting aside of funds, "to aid the relocation of tenants", the final settlement "encouraged the use of programs generally available to assist tenants of public housing project".

Welfare and Section 8 guidelines were adopted as the "assistance guidelines" (Lewis, A-5), and the fact that these programs have "particular

application procedures, benefits and criteria..." was emphasized. These two programs provided guidelines of eligibility and allowable payments for rent, food and maintenance (interview). Furthermore, there was no mention of provisions for the purchase of new stoves and furniture- as the residents had demanded. Eventually, renters were given an \$800 voucher to purchase a stove and refrigerator for their new units.

In spite of the fact that the crisis was caused by toxic waste contamination, no special arrangements were made by the State for the particular problems arising from the contamination- such as the health problems. The use of AFDC and Section 8 guidelines meant that even if a renter were compensated for damage to health in personal injury court, any amount of money exceeding set limits would be deducted from future payments. This meant that basically, the renters got no compensation for damage done to their health either from the government or from any outside settlements they may have received. They were not provided with any means through which they could seek out specialized medical care to heal their unique problems. Though Mrs. Lewis documents the fact that the renters were very much affected by the contamination, as "they suffered all sorts of illnesses and pathologies", the final benefits package made no provisions to provide for, "compensation for loss of personal property or health" (interview). They were forced to rely on the clinic system for care- an issue that concerns Mrs. Lewis even today as, "dormant health problems may not be found when renters seek medical attention at clinics- they miss it" (interview). Trained specialists in diseases that people exposed to toxic chemicals are more at risk of developing were not consulted or made available to the renters. The renters had to seek health advice from non-specialists, who had probably little information about the early warning signals of conditions or illnesses they should watch out for. There was no follow-up either- which could have been another way to expand the knowledge and information available to people about their illnesses and about possible effects of these illnesses on the next generation. A series of steps that could have been taken were not taken.

In fact, the settlement was not even called a "benefits package" by State officials, but "final terms". Rather than compensating victims for their exposure and loss in quality of life for having to leave Love Canal, the State declared that, "the goal of the relocation program for tenants shall be to provide the relocation assistance that is necessary to allow a tenant family to relocate from the area with little or no expense to a situation at least equal to their present housing." Illustrating the general lack of ability to understand the renters' plight, the State ignored the difficulty that large numbers of big families would face when they sought to find adequate housing at the same time. The leaders returned to the inner-city, in East Niagara Falls- an area with serious environmental problems, as many of the companies, including Occidental, are located there. The Renters Association; however, was not the only citizen organization at Love Canal that felt the final settlement and negotiating process to be unjust.

### **The Other Citizen Group: Concerned Area Residents**

Unlike the dominant literature, the alternative literature adds information about all of the citizens' groups at Love Canal, including the Concerned Area Residents (CAR). Like the RA and the LCHA, the CAR worked for the evacuation of its constituents. Although they were homeowners, the CAR neither worked with nor agreed with the tactics of the LCHA. Unlike the LCHA, the CAR attempted to become an "umbrella" organization, to "represent the interests of all of the residents of the area" (Shaw, 5). According to Shaw, the CAR leadership had once been part of the Action Group within the LCHA trying to reform it. The CAR disagreed with the LCHA's method of cooperating with government. Assuming leadership after the first president, Nora Preuster, left, Bill Waggoneer said that he was opposed to the fact that she had, "worked more closely with city officials" than he did. Like the RA, Waggoneer focused on health and said that he was dissatisfied with the way that the state handled the compensation, never resolving or following up on important questions.

Like the RA, the CAR was initially omitted from the state settlement. Telling me how unfair this was, Waggoneer explained that the state said that one side of 93rd Street (within the borders of the LCHA's sphere of concern) was contaminated, and that the other side (his sphere) was not. Eventually, Waggoneer was able to convince state officials to include them in the evacuation. Unlike the RA, Waggoneer was able to get access to the state and city officials, meeting privately with Representatives Pillater and Murphy and state senators for 4 hours before being included. Although government did finally buy the CAR's homes, Waggoneer told me that they got fewer extra benefits than the LCHA did.

### **Re-Considering the Dominant Portrayal of the LCHA and Gibbs**

The alternative literature also adds information about Gibbs and the LCHA which should lead us to re-consider her image. Shedding new light on how she operated, the information shows that her concern was limited to particular homeowners, her goals changed over time, and she entered into a relationship- perhaps even a deal with government. The alternative writers reveal the other reasons besides Gibbs' leadership skills which contributed to her being chosen LCHA president. Lewis, Shaw and even Gibbs say government influenced her selection because, "officials could work with her." According to Murth, government officials, "prefer working with someone who is less hostile and less confrontational" (interview).

Lewis also shows that the group underwent an evolution in its goals- and that the initial goals of the organization changed with time- another fact that the dominant literature either doesn't mention or downplays. While the LCHA was initially concerned with, "health testing and avoiding contamination..", their interest evolved to "developing strategies to influence governmental officials and negotiating for government purchase of their homes at fair value" (Lewis, 5). Their changed concern was reflected in the final settlement reached by the Revitalization Agency and funded by the State and Federal government, which allocated money on the basis of property and

made no provisions for health. No long-term follow-up, no access to special care or guaranteed medical treatment was included. One wonders what the reasons were for the organization's change in focus and whether or not an outside entity was influencing Gibbs? I believe that this change is the key to understanding how Gibbs was coopted by government. I will take up this subject in Chapter 5, though I will continue here to lay out the evidence for my theory that Gibbs and the government made a secret deal.

Some of the evidence for my hypothesis comes from Gibbs' autobiography and her descriptions of her interactions with government and the Renters Association. Throughout the book, she shows her numerous interactions with government officials and politicians and the different roles she played: advisor, recipient of governmental favors, behind-the-scenes negotiator, liaison between government and residents. From the first week of the crisis in August, 1978, Gibbs attended high-level state and federal meetings and met privately with politicians, including Governor Carey, US Senators Moynihan, and the state representatives Murphy and Pillater, on a regular basis.

In addition to the private meetings, she says that she was made privy by government officials to important, potentially explosive information on two occasions and that she kept this secret rather than reveal it. The first incident concerned the inadequacy of the safety plans to evacuate residents in the case of an explosion. Rather than sharing the information with the LCHA members, Gibbs used it as a leverage tool, saying that the residents would "have a fit" if the information were released. Rather than informing her own people- or even other members of the leadership- she operated on her own, as an autonomous agent. In the second instance, she played the state powers against the Federal by threatening to release information obtained from the federal government about the state's insufficient utilization of Federal funds and programs to help residents. At this time, however, she did not release the information either to her constituents or to the media, though she threatened to do so, "to get attention" (Gibbs, 133) if the State did not act. She showed the state that she had ammunition, but she does not say how or if she used it.

The fact that government made private information available to Gibbs and she did not share it with her group- or release it to the press, reveals the way she operated and the type of leader that she was. Further bolstering my assertion of her deal-making with government, these examples throw doubt on her portrayal as a truly "grass-roots" leader and instead suggest that she was more of a power-broker. Although she is often portrayed as fighting with government, this sharing of and withholding of information suggests that her interaction with government was more complex than that of an activist. There was a web of connections, a special access, a giving and receiving of information, a certain amount of "representation" that Gibbs did for the government that must be analyzed. Her description of her dealings with renters reveal more about the type of leader she was as well as her relationship vis-a-vis government. Her descriptions of interactions with the renters not only show the limits of her concern to homeowners within her

geographic area, but also suggests that government relied on her as its representative. When she attended a meeting at LaSalle in August, 1978, (Gibbs, 53) she stood up for the government when renters complained about the government's delay in analyzing their test results. She responded by saying,

I tried to explain, I was defending the health department, and so they attacked me. (Gibbs, 58)

She took the side of the state rather than legitimating renters' grievances, even though she had written, "The health department was terrible; everything they did was disorganized" a few pages before. Her defense of government is somewhat puzzling because throughout the book she emphasizes her "battle" with government. A few pages before, she says that she was fighting to get more citizen representation; yet when the renters express a concern, she takes the side of the state.

Her motives for doing so are also questionable. Was the state using her? Had she agreed to act as a representative of the government in the community? The above example also suggests that Gibbs viewed the renters as opponents rather than allies. It is as if in her mind a loss to renters was a gain for homeowners; any gains that the renters might make would be taken as a threat to her own power and her ability to attain her goals. She clearly was not a community-wide leader, but a leader of the most-powerful constituents of the Love Canal community: the propertied, the white and not the primarily Black renters. This incident crystallizes both the kind of leader she was, and shows that she had greater allegiance to the government than to renters. This lack of concern for the renters was also revealed, as I stated earlier in Chapter 3, by her protest of renters inclusion in the evacuation order. Instead of viewing the renters as allies, she treated them as opponents. Her actions also show that the Love Canal community was divided along racial and property lines- a fact that raises questions about exactly how democratic and fair the LCHA was, challenging its mythic representation.

In addition to taking the side of the state in certain key situations, Gibbs also plays on racial fears and stereotypes in her account, saying that she was in danger because of a threat of violence. To show herself as a sympathetic figure trying to help others and finding the renters difficult, she said, "Before, my greatest fear was that some one would slam a door in my face. Now, here was a whole group yelling at me." She also uses racial stereotypes to justify her treatment- of the renters:

After the meeting, a nice young Black girl came up to me. She asked how I could have possibly stayed through the whole meeting. She wouldn't have. There were certain parties who were known to have used a knife or do something drastic when they were angry. She said they were irrational people. Ignorance was one of the best things I had going for me; it had a lot to do with what I did. I didn't know any better, that's why I wasn't afraid (Gibbs, 58).

Picking up on the heroic tone often used to describe her, she portrays herself as having risked her well-being and/or life to try to meet with the renters. In her description, the renters are irrational, prone to violence, dangerous. The fact that she even attended and remained at the meeting was proof of her

compassion for renters and her courage. Their irrationality was what really prevented Gibbs from working with them. Apparently, she thought that they were naive and would simply accept her defense of the State because she defended it. Instead, indicating their astuteness, renters told Gibbs that, "she was as bad as the government" (Gibbs, 53). Unlike the mythic account, in the anti-myth, renters and homeowners competed more than cooperated

In my interview with Mr. Eve, he said that economic interests conditioned the "white political leadership's" actions. Speaking broadly, he mentions the local merchants who wanted the renters to remain at Love Canal because they didn't want to lose customers. Although Eve only hinted at this, Herbert Lewis, Shaw and Murth suggested that the renters' exclusion came from the homeowners desire to get as much as possible for their group--including money to buy their homes, and other services. Indeed, the leaders of the RA and the CAR told me that they suspected that Gibbs cut a deal with the government, as did Lewis and as Murth suggested.

Gibbs says that government was trying to divide and conquer residents. She suggested that Cora Hoffman, a governmental liaison from the Governor's office (55) tried to foster dissent between the renters and the homeowners. Trying to pinpoint a reason for the renter-homeowner conflict, Gibbs said that she found out that "Cora Hoffman....had worked to organize a separate black group instead of helping us to work together." It is clear that, for whatever, reason, she felt that the government was trying to sap the strength of her movement by dividing people. Clearly Gibbs was concerned about what government was going to do. Did the government use this issue in the context of secret negotiations and meetings? Did they threaten to pour more attention and money on the renters at the expense of the homeowners? This is a complicated issue, we have incomplete information and clearly we cannot conclude much. But these questions may shed new light on how the crisis was resolved. The clues can be put together to create a more realistic picture, revealing important lessons that have not been illuminated about the Love Canal story, which I will consider in Chapter 5.

#### **Outlines of the Deal Made Between Gibbs and Government**

Evidence from a number of different sources, as well as conclusions drawn from analyzing the settlement, suggest that Lois Gibbs and the government cut a deal to resolve the crisis, which benefited the LCHA at the expense of the other residents. The other citizen leaders, Mrs. Herbert and Mr. Waggoneer, told me they believed that she did, as did government worker Martha Lewis. When I asked politician Mr. Eve, he did not say either "no" or that he had no information to indicate this; rather he said that he, "couldn't comment on that in any way.", suggesting that there was something to it, that he could not speak about. Other evidence of a deal is the fact that the compensation was not based on factors that were more neutral or impartial to one group: such as duration of stay at the Canal, or proximity to the contamination(taking into consideration facts such as the difference between dry/wet areas-, etc.). Rather the basis was chosen to benefit homeowners.

I will lay-out here what I believe the outlines of the deal were.

Both Gibbs and the government had a number of different interests and goals; the word "deal" implies that the actors must give up something in order to get something else. Both actors also had long- and short-term goals. The LCHA's short-term interests were centered on protecting their financial investment and getting out of the area as soon as possible; their long-term interests involved health issues and medical follow-up and treatment. The government's short-term interests were to resolve the crisis as quickly and as cheaply as possible, in such a way as to give the impression that not only the specific problem at Love Canal had been resolved, but also the larger problem it indicated, contained. The government's long-term interests were to avoid uncovering the massive regional and possibly national problem of toxic contamination and long-term health difficulties of the residents resulting from military activities. The settlement that was affected allows both actors to get their short-term goals; though government also achieves its long-term goal of minimizing both its role in the creation of the hazard at Love Canal and the scope of the problem. In addition to benefiting the LCHA and the government, it also benefits Gibbs personally. She can present herself as a successful leader, her group "victorious", and she can build a career for herself on the basis of her reputation, advising other groups nation-wide. Based on the information I have gathered, I believe that government agreed to buy-out Gibbs in return for her giving up attempts to get more information about health, not bringing attention to the role of the US Army in dumping at the Canal and the wide scope of the contamination problem.

#### **The Environmental Problems Revealed**

Michael Zweig's 1981 report, The Federal Connection, was commissioned by the New York State Assembly Task Force on Toxic Substances. It dispels misperceptions by presenting new information, re-interpreting conclusions, and placing the Love Canal crisis in a regional and national context. His report raises important questions about federal defense activities in the region which could not be answered, showing what is not known. He also makes a series of suggestions for actions which should be taken by the government to assess and to remedy the situation in the Greater Niagara region. The new information and the identification of broad themes can be organized into major points.

Most importantly, Zweig's report states conclusively that the US Army did dump at Love Canal. He shows not only that the Army did "openly, concertedly and repeatedly dispose of drummed materials at Love Canal (Zweig, ii)" but also the meaning of it saying, "it contributed significantly to the toxic contamination at Love Canal."

Zweig also shows that the waste was generated through the production of war materials for government. Unlike Levine who states that the wastes were generated from "industrial processes", Zweig shows the wastes came from the production of explosives and chemical and nuclear weapons for the war effort. Indeed, the period of the dumping coincides with the "entrenchment of the defense industry" in the Greater Niagara Region.

Although the Hooker Electrochemical Company is often portrayed as the primary culprit in the dominant literature, Zweig reports that 60-70% of the Company's production during the dumping was to fulfill government contracts. In addition, the Federal government developed a close relationship with the Federal government during the period when Hooker was dumping. Hooker operated 2 government- owned or -equipped facilities during the war, manufacturing thionyl chloride or dodecyl mercaptan. Waste generated from the production of these chemicals accounted for more than 60% of the materials Hooker dumped into the Canal. This example shows that much of the waste came from the production of war materials to fulfill governmental contracts.

Studying the source of wastes dumped in the Canal, Zweig recognizes that Niagara Falls was not only important because it was one of the most active industrial centers for chemical productions and processing during World War II, but also because it was central to the national defense. Looking at the causes of the dumping, Zweig shows the Love Canal crisis is a clue revealing Federal actions in the region. Zweig writes that, "Love Canal and Federal involvement there were merely the proverbial tip of the iceberg." Indeed, the crisis at Love Canal is part of a regional story, indicative of a larger pattern of governmental actions and environmental problems. In order to understand the cause and significance of Love Canal, one must investigate the history of "federal mismanagement" and "exploitation and despoliation of widespread sections of ....New York state" (Zweig, 1).

In fact, because of his discovery that there are, "several federal monuments to environmental folly in both the Niagara and Erie counties..... created because of the crisis of war" as Love Canal was, the focus of his report was expanded (Zweig, 2). Although his inquiry began as an investigation of the Army role at Love Canal it "expanded radically" to trace the "Federal government's legacy of contamination of the Niagara Falls county." Zweig shows that there is a history of regional federal actions which form a pattern. In Zweig's report, the crisis at Love Canal was the first part of a puzzle, leading to the uncovering of a larger pattern.

In Zweig's story, the principle actors are "various agencies of the Federal government" (Zweig, 2). Though government did not always act alone, but sometimes in partnership with private industry, many harmful actions were taken, either instigated or approved by government, or to fulfill government contract. In fact, the extent and range of governmental action in the region was so great that Zweig says it raises new questions about liability; Zweig makes a case for full governmental responsibility for cleaning up Love Canal and the other sites. Not only did the US Army dispose of waste at Love Canal, but it also had a close relationship with private contractors, such as Hooker, which ran the government-owned P-45 plant during the war.

By showing the range of environmental problems in the Greater Niagara Region caused by federal actions, Zweig demonstrates that Love Canal reveals a regional story. Through his discussion of both the range of actions taken by military and federal personnel and through the detailed



analysis of two specific sites, Zweig shows that the scope of the environmental problem in the Niagara region goes far beyond Love Canal. Zweig's report focuses on two particularly important sites of federal activity. At the federally-owned Lake Ontario Ordnance Works ("LOOW"), there was insufficient decontamination of the Army TNT plant and "significant radioactive contamination on and off" this site because of its use as a storage facility for radioactive wastes. According to Zweig this site poses a "continuing environmental hazard"... because materials have been "migrating off the site through the air and through the surface drainage system" (Zweig, viii). Though its danger is known, there is incomplete information about the site- no extensive surveys about the contamination or analysis of the condition of the underground wells. The other site is the Linde Air Products where the government approved the dumping of 37 million gallons of radioactively contaminated chemical wastes in underground wells( iv) from 1944-46 and thousands of gallons of thiocyanate wastes into the Niagara River (Zweig, ix). Another unresolved problem relates to the health of workers of Manhattan Project and AEC plants who were exposed to "excessive levels of radiation (Zweig, v)" and governmental failure to inform, evaluate physically, or compensate these workers.

Zweig shows that there was an overall governmental pattern of negligence and mismanagement, emanating at least in part from the decision-making process which was "hasty, ill-informed, or uncaring..." (Zweig, 2). At LOOWS, for example, the record-keeping system was "sloppy and deficient" (Zweig, viii) and there was "technological primitivism" in the disposal and storage of dangerous wastes. In other instances, Federal officials made important decisions not on the basis of safety or geographical appropriateness but because of "availability of land" (Zweig, viii). Certain characteristics of the LOOWS landscape, for example, made it a poor choice for storing chemicals, but because it was available and cheap, government chose it. The Federal officials took other actions which demonstrated little regard for human safety or environmental integrity, such as the disposal of rusting barrels containing radioactive wastes along the road.

Other governmental practices were more duplicitous, such as the purposeful misleading of state and local officials about the potential health hazard posed by the LOOWs site. Rather than informing officials about the true nature of the work occurring on site, and the radioactive danger it posed, government officials misled state officials in some cases, leading to the delaying of safety measures to contain the migration of chemicals. In fact, Zweig characterizes the federal agents as "operating under a shroud of secrecy" (Zweig, 3).

In fact, early on in the report, Zweig says that one object of the report is to (Zweig, 3) "force the Federal agencies to take the initiative in addressing the impact of its past activities." Though he says that the enactment of the Superfund is beneficial, it is not nearly enough of a commitment to solve the regional problems.

The significance of Zweig's findings extend beyond the Greater Niagara Frontier region. Indeed, Zweig believes that his story has nation-wide meaning. Because Federal actors were directing and assuming responsibility for many of the decisions, the Love Canal story probably reveals a nation-wide pattern. Indeed, New York state is not the only state in which the DOE and the AEC-MP ran operations. The Love Canal is relevant to all states in which AEC and MP- facilities were located. The uncovering of the Love Canal and Niagara Region stories have national significance, raising questions, "What other sites within New York State and throughout the country have similarly evaded detection and remediation by the Federal government?" (Zweig, 4) The story which Zweig tells show that "federal enclaves" are established within states, cut out by defense related activities, but which influence the region greatly.

While the dominant writers focused solely on the Love Canal story, Zweig amplifies the focus to the region and to the nation. He has uncovered not just a random, isolated occurrence but a part of a pattern- a sign revealing the national problem of contamination emanating from defense-related activities. His interpretation of causes and his assignment of blame differs from the dominant writers. The dominant writers identify Hooker and private industry as the culprit- the party bearing the majority of the responsibility for the creation of the hazard, while Zweig blames government. Zweig and the dominant writers also differ in the treatment of government. The dominant writers either fail to mention the government's role in the creation of the hazard, or absolve government of responsibility . Zweig contests this by showing that not only did the government dump, but it also hired Hooker worked as a contractor during the period of dumping.

### **Conclusion**

This examination has dispelled many aspects of the myth. First, I added information about renters and the RA. Second, I re-examined and added information about Lois Gibbs and the LCHA. Though in the mythic account Gibbs is a community-wide leader, in reality her concern was limited to a geographically-specific group of homeowners. Though she is often perceived to be an example of a grass-roots leader, her relationship with government, her mode of operation and the influence government exerted to encourage her selection as president cast doubt, suggesting that she was more of a power-broker. I also showed that though Gibbs and the dominant writers said that the citizens were united, "unified" under one group, in reality citizens were divided and disagreed about goals and tactics; the hostile interaction led to the gain of one group- the LCHA- at the expense of the others. Third, I showed that Love Canal is not an isolated occurrence, but an indicator of a much greater regional, and possibly national, problem of toxic contamination. In Chapter 5, I will examine why and how the myth came into being, as well as the lessons that can be taught by its uncovering.

THE MYTH	EVIDENCE THAT MYTH ACCEPTED	COUNTER-EVIDENCE
<i>Affected population at Love Canal were homeowners</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Government-media sole focus on homeowners in initial and post-crisis phase</li> <li>*No attention to specific renter concerns until the final stages of the crisis</li> <li>*Some pieces (such as Environmental Reporter Article and retrospective articles) completely omit renters</li> <li>*Gibbs and Levine don't mention renters until half-way through the book as secondary characters; give a limited definition of "citizens"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Data from the NFHA show that at the time of the crisis some 865 renters lived at LaSalle, a substantial population</li> <li>*Media accounts include information about the renters' plight (Spring, 1980)</li> <li>*My interviews and Shaw, Lewis articles chronicle renters' organizing efforts</li> </ul>
<i>The neighborhood consisted mostly or completely of single-family homes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Maps of the area which delete LaSalle (NYT post-crisis stories)</li> <li>*Government health tests(Aug.'78) which focus on the homeowners exclusively (until much later when include renters)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Maps of area which include LaSalle (NYT, Spring, 1980)</li> </ul>
<i>The citizens' settlement was a "victory" for all</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Called the "most successful single-cause grass-roots movement of recent American history" by Arthur Levine</li> <li>*Dominant writers equates the agreement to buy the LCHA's homes with citizen victory</li> <li>*Stated in Gibbs and Levine's books</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Compensates victims for property not health</li> <li>*Renters received unequal compensation: no health care (Eve, Lewis, Shaw)</li> <li>*Settlement omits provisions for long-term health studies to determine consequences</li> <li>*People are re-settling at Love Canal presently</li> <li>*Shaw, Lewis, my interviews document the the injustices of the settlement</li> </ul>
<i>Gibbs was grass-roots hero and LCHA the representative of all LC citizens</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Dominant accounts call her the leader; never refer to other leaders by name</li> <li>*Reporters use Gibbs as point of reference, her story as case study (esp. in human interest stories)</li> <li>*Dominant media accountns include information about renter leadership only at end of crisis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*The existence of other groups shows that Gibbs was not the representative of all, indicates disunity</li> <li>*Shaw, Levine reports outline disagreements between LCHA and other citizen groups</li> <li>*My interviews document Gibbs' exclusionary tactics (Levine,Eve, Lewis)</li> </ul>

THE MYTH	EVIDENCE THAT MYTH ACCEPTED	COUNTER-EVIDENCE
<i>Gibbs continued</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Unequal treatment/coverage in media: no inclusion of renters in human interest topics, usually mentioned only at end of article, in no more than one paragraph</li> <li>*Hints that Gibbs had a special relationship with government: Levine, Shaw, Eve, Lewis, Waggoneer</li> </ul>
<i>crisis ended in 1980 when the Federal government agreed to buy LCHA homes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*National media portray crisis as ended when most homeowners sold homes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Some renters didn't move out until 1986</li> <li>*New families are being moved in to Love Canal now</li> <li>*There are unresolved and unexplored health questions re. the impact of exposure on health</li> </ul>
<i>Love Canal as an isolated event (rather than an indicator of regional and national problem of toxic waste)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Dominant literature (Levine, Gibbs) sole or primary focus on Love Canal</li> <li>*Dominant writers fail to place specific events of crisis in a larger historical context</li> <li>*Give little or no attention to the fact that crisis is an indicator of the regional-national problem of toxic waste contamination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Zweig mentions that there are 200 such dumps in Greater Niagara Region</li> <li>*Love Canal is but "the proverbial tip of the iceberg" according to Zweig</li> <li>*The crisis resulted from a pattern of government actions</li> </ul>
<i>the crisis was caused by "industrial processes" and not the military and nuclear build-up of the 40's and 50's</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Levine credits "industrial processes" (not military and nuclear build-up)</li> <li>*Media adopt government focus on Hooker as major/sole culprit and ignore/downplay the central government role in creating the hazard</li> <li>*Trace current uses of toxic containment (but fail to see problem in its historic context)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Zweig traces the uses of the chemicals: war materials produced for the Federal government</li> <li>*60% Hooker production during this time to fulfill government contracts</li> <li>*Period of dumping coincides with the "entrenchment of defense industry" in Greater Niagara Frontier Region (Zweig)</li> <li>*The Greater Niagara Region was central to the national defense: ASC and MP facilities there (Zweig)</li> </ul>
<i>downplay the role of the US Army in the dumping</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Dominant accounts treat Army dumping as either inconclusive or insignificant fact (fail to explore the financial and liability questions)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*The US Army dumping "contributed significantly" to the creation of the hazard (Zweig)</li> <li>*The Army dumped often at Love Canal (Zweig)</li> </ul>

## **Chapter 5:**

### **Analysis of the Myth**

Not only is the Love Canal crisis significant, as the first incidence of widespread contamination of a residential neighborhood, but so is the story which tells of the crisis. This story is important as a narrative which teaches lessons and reveals general truths about modern-day American society, as a precedent on a policy level, and as an example of successful organizing on a grassroots level. In this thesis, I have shown the different ways in which the widely-accepted account of the Love Canal crisis is a myth containing inaccuracies, distortions, omissions and partial truths. In addition, I have uncovered another story- a reality- which is very different from the popular story about Love Canal.

In the first four chapters, I presented information about the events of the crisis and the history of the Canal's and region's development and analyzed the myth and anti-myth. In Chapter 2, I gave an overview of the development of the Greater Niagara Frontier region, showing how changes in the region's economy were reflected in the different uses of the Canal area. I also showed how the hazard was created and which levels of government contributed to the problem. In Chapter 3, I reviewed the dominant literature showing how dominant accounts portrayed events and gave meaning to them. Although not each work followed the exact same patters, I identified a series of common omissions, distortions and partial truths. In Chapter 4, I uncovered the myth, reviewing the alternate literature and adding new information collected from my investigation. I also looked at specific passages contained in the dominant literature which support the premises of the anti-myth.

In this chapter, I will review what I have uncovered about the myth and anti-myth and examine why and how the myth came to be. Looking at the interests of the different parties involved in settling the crisis, I will show how certain elements of the myth serve some parties' interests. Beyond serving the interests of the parties, the myth re-enforces certain cultural truths and values which I will reveal. I will also summarize how my investigation and analysis was instructive to me and I hope can be to others as well.

#### **How the Myth Was Created**

To analyze the myth, it is necessary to not only determine which actors it benefits, but also how it came into being. Set in motion by a set of actions and circumstances, it became a dynamic. In the initial stages, the State government made it clear that the homeowners were the victims. The government took this stance because it was homes which bordered the Canal; LaSalle was located slightly away from the Canal. The government was also interested in limiting the scope of the crisis, so naturally, it picked the parties closest to the contamination. As a result of this approach, the first tests were done only on homeowners living in closest proximity to the Canal.

The press picked up on the government's treatment, and instead of giving an overview of the neighborhood, they followed the government's

lead, focusing on the homeowners. Rather than relying on other sources of information and looking at the big picture, the reporters looked at the story from the angle they were led to by government. As is often the case, the press picks up on the way that the government tells the story-rather than independently questioning. Because the government was ignoring the renters, it was easier for the press to give much less press to the renters than to homeowners; this fed into the misconception that they were not there, or not in sufficient numbers.

Another reason for the creation of the myth is probably the attitudes, sympathies and perceptions of different actors, such as the media and the bureaucrats on site. Not only did their perceptions influence their work, but it also colored their understanding of events. Many alternate and dominant writers say that the bureaucrats' sympathy for homeowners was an important factor in the decision to evacuate. One can assume from the descriptions, that many of these bureaucrats- were White, middle-class people. From assessing the settlement which benefits the primarily White more middle-class people, we can assume that the sympathy extended to people who were like them. Perhaps part of the reason that the renters were not compensated and their story not told was because those in power did not relate to or sympathize with them in the way that they did with homeowners. In Chapter 3, I showed that the press presented the homeowners as the "real victims". Many if not all of the reporters were White. The work of Levine and Gibbs also reveals little concern or sympathy for renters. I will explore this subject in further detail and from another angle later.

Another reason for this primary focus on homeowners was their organizing tactics, which differed from the RA and the CAR. Lois Gibbs had begun organizing months before the crisis began, and went into action immediately after emergency was declared. Renters were at a disadvantage from the beginning because they were not organized in a pre-organizing stage, and the LCHA obviously did not want to include them. The LCHA was able to get more press, further pushing the concept that the Love Canal residents were all homeowners.

Although newspaper reports written during the time of the crisis' resolution briefly mention renters, many reporters allowed Gibbs and the government to become the story tellers (especially in human interest stories), making them powerful, visible forces. The media was very influenced by Gibbs and reporters often told the Love Canal story using her experience as a case study. They took her interpretation as the generally accepted one; she became the voice of the effected citizenry until the end of the crisis when the renters also were included and portrayed as a dissenting voice. Gibbs was a very appealing person to the media and to the culture because her story fit so well into the underlying stories which exert a great deal of power in our culture, such as that of the "little person succeeding against the big forces" and of the success of "grassroots organizations" to influence governmental institutions. In addition, the story of Gibbs' personal transcendence from homemaker to political leader appealed to the feminist movement and was

re-inforced by feminists, as evidenced by my own interest in this story and that of my professor, feminist scholar Dr. Jill Conway. These are some of the reasons for the initial appearance of the narrative myth. While it was not created to serve the interests of the government or Gibbs, the myth did serve the purpose of re-enforcing the governmental focus on homeowners. In order to consider the other reasons for the myth's existence, it is necessary to consider how it functions as a series of narratives.

### **The Myth as Narrative**

In addition to functioning as a series of untruths, the myth operates as a set of narratives which gives meaning to the Love Canal story and reveals general "truths" and "lessons". The narratives re-enforce certain ideas valued highly in our culture about the sanctity of one's home, and the safety of one's environment. The narratives also infuse the events of the crisis with meaning.

The narrative influences society to understand events by re-interpreting them through the lens of the powerful stories of our own culture. The depiction of Gibbs as homemaker-turned- 'justice fighter' re-affirms the existence of heroes. The "victory" of the LCHA shows that citizens can force government to be "accountable" and that the "little people" in democracy do ultimately have the power to make government accountable. The portrayal of the settlement as being ultimately fair reinforces the idea that democratic government is "just". Though the Federal government had to be prodded by the LCHA, the fact that it bought the citizens' homes and "remediated" the contamination, re-assures us that our homes and property investments are safe. The Love Canal crisis is an epic story that hides another, more revealing tale about modern day society- about the cleavages of race and class, injustice, incomplete solutions to complex problems of the environment which affect all of us- our health and quality of life.

### **An Exploration of the Different Actors' Interests**

To determine which aspects of the myth benefit which party, it is necessary to consider the interests of the major players: the citizens groups, the government, and the media. Within these broad categories, we must consider the different citizens groups and levels of government as well as the politicians and bureaucrats. Not all of the elements of the myth benefit all parties; some interests were conflictual, and others meshed. The myth exists for a reason. Although it may have been inadvertently created or by different forces and actors, it definitely protects the interests of the two most powerful groups in settling the crisis: the government and the LCHA. Not all of the elements of the myth serve an interest.

There were more than 30 different government agencies involved in resolving the crisis, cutting across local, state and federal levels. There were both elected officials and bureaucrats at the scene, who wielded power and operated differently, sometimes even having different interests. Though some interests were not shared by all levels of government, two important ones were: to effect a permanent resolution of the crisis as soon as possible, and to limit the amount of expenditures.

The local government of the City of Niagara Falls wanted to minimize the import of the crisis and the scope of the problem. Economic interests motivated the City of Niagara Falls, which sought to protect its economic base of tourism and chemical manufacturing. In addition, the local government was concerned with losing revenue by losing part of its tax base and paying out part of the expenditure for the remediation work and other compensations. It wanted to pay less than the other parties.

Like the City of Niagara Falls, the government of New York state wanted to expend the least amount of money possible to resolve the crisis quickly. More importantly, the state wanted to avoid becoming fiscally and procedurally responsible for the crisis; they wanted the Federal government to take responsibility. This desire motivated the State to take numerous different actions to secure a commitment and funds from the Federal; they altered some of their policies, and the reasons for taking them, in order to get the money.

Like the State, the Federal government did not want to become responsible for the crisis. Concerned with establishing costly precedents, the Federal government wanted to limit the amount of direct responsibility that it took as well and money that it committed to the clean-up and resolution. In addition, the Federal government wanted to downplay or keep secret its involvement in the dumping, which would have led to it taking greater responsibility and committing greater resources.

According to many accounts, the bureaucrats on the scene, meanwhile, sympathized with the residents and wanted to see them moved out as soon as possible. They; however, had to contend with the details of funding and procedures when politicians made promises. Sometimes politicians made promises which seemed unfeasible which the bureaucrats had to carry out, as when Governor Carey promised to buy the homes of all inner-ring homeowners without ensuring there were sufficient funds to do so.

Politicians from all different levels of government shared one interest in common: the desire to be re-elected. Because there was an enormous amount of public sympathy for the Love Canal residents, politicians did not want to appear unresponsive, unfair or unhelpful towards the citizen activists. Lois Gibbs worked this extremely well, and two of the most central decisions made at Love Canal: the first evacuation of homeowners in August, 1978 and Federal action to allow for the final evacuation in the Spring and Summer of 1980 came before gubernatorial and presidential elections, respectively.

The citizens groups had similar and divergent interests, which led them eventually to be at odds with each other. All three groups were concerned with health- though the primacy of this goal changed for the LCHA over time. All three were also concerned with being evacuated. Other interests diverged. The LCHA, for example, not only wanted to be compensated for their loss in property value, but also to receive a package of benefits. The RA and CAR wanted to be treated as well as the homeowners were, and fought being excluded from the negotiation process and the



granting of compensation. Like homeowners, many renters wanted to be evacuated; they too wanted to be compensated for their loss in quality of life. They wanted to be treated with respect and to be included in the decision making process as much as Gibbs was.

In addition, Gibbs probably had other personal goals. She gained a high degree of personal fame because of her work at Love Canal, and her image as a successful grass-roots leader is important to her professional reputation now. As she told the Washington Post, "Love Canal was a nightmare, but at least I got a career out of it." Because of her fame and popular depiction of her as a hero, she made a great deal of money. In 1981, her autobiography was published and work began on a made-for-TV movie about her life. In the early 1980's, using money from the proceeds of the book and movie about her life, she founded the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste. She is now Executive Director. In many ways, the depiction of her as hero and of the citizens as victorious is central to her professional life, as she now advises other groups facing similar problems.

#### **How the Myth Benefits the Most Powerful Actors**

As we have seen, the myth functions as a narrative superseding particular interests. It also serves to re-enforce or serve the interests of some of the parties. To determine whose interests the myth serves and to pull together the findings of my thesis, I will review the elements of the myth and what they obscure.

The absence of significant information about the renters benefits both Gibbs and the federal government. Gibbs was able to protect her reputation. Revelations of her exclusionary tactics and her sole interest in the homeowners would be detrimental to her career. If more had been revealed about the renters' plight, then it would have become apparent that an injustice had occurred at Love Canal- that Gibbs was a part of. Her presentation of herself as a "justice fighter" would be cast in doubt. It hides the fact that Gibbs was not a grass-roots leader, a fighter of government, but a political insider, one who opted to negotiate with government rather than take others. It hides the fact that her constituency was limited in geography- and not only did not represent all citizens- but also all homeowners. She did not get some of the most important things for her people: such as guarantees about health compensation and follow-up. The dominant treatment of the renters benefits the federal government by making it seem that it had really responded to citizens' concerns, protecting the general well-being of the community. If the renters' outcome was more widely publicized, the unequal treatment afforded to renters and homeowners would make the Federal government seem unjust.

The suggestion that the Love Canal was somehow an isolated incident and that the Army did not dump there benefits the Federal government. Had the truth been more widely known about its role, the Federal government would have been held accountable, forced to assume more fiscal and administrative responsibility for the clean-up and tests at Love Canal. In addition, if the truth of the widespread nature of the contamination had

become clear, a regional and perhaps national plan would have had to be formulated and implemented because much of the contamination was caused by US Army activities. As Zweig shows, up until the crisis, most of the Federal government's activities in the region had been shrouded in secret. The mythic account continues to prevent the Federal government's actions in the region from coming to light

One of the main functions of the myth is to obscure the fact that injustices occurred because of the way that the crisis was resolved. It hides the fact that the settlement- far from being a "victory" for all citizens- was really a failure for all in some ways, and a complete failure for some. The most powerful group was compensated for property damage, renters were not compensated for loss in quality of life. I have already reviewed how the renters were left out of the compensation package; I have not; however, talked about the others- indeed- the continued injustices which are perpetuated because of the way the crisis was settled. No Love Canal residents were guaranteed medical follow-up or health care; as a result there are very few answers about the long-term impact of the exposure. In addition, because of the resolution, important questions such as the safety of the area- were left unresolved, leaving to government the design of tests to determine "habitability." We have seen that the problem at Love Canal is not really solved and that we as a society are not really safe from the problem of toxic waste. There are clearly a lot of questions that have not been answered. But because of the way that the settlement was effected, the government is able to say that the lack of an answer, the absence of definitive facts- means an absence of problems. As a result, new families are moving back to Love Canal, when there is no information available about the health affects of the exposure.

The myth benefits other levels of government as well. For the local government of Niagara Falls, the mythic story protects ensures that they don't lose their tourist appeal. Now that new inhabitants are being moved in to the Love Canal area, they can also re-coup some of their tax basis. The State, which has succeeded in keeping secret the results of health data and questionnaires - can presumably avoid acknowledging and confronting the major health disaster that Love Canal probably was. One of the effects is on national policy to deal with other hazardous waste sites, contained in the 1980 Superfund legislation. As the Federal government chose to compensate homeowners for their homes rather than all citizens for the damage to their health, so does Superfund leave out any provisions for compensation for health problems, long-term follow-up or access to medical care. The only parties compensated under Superfund are property owners- and only they for the damage to their property (Environmental Reporter, 1984, 840). The way that Love Canal was resolved- the process and way used there- became the basis for the policy of future Love Canals. And this means that the injustices at Love Canal- of compensating only for property, of not making provisions for health- continue to be perpetuated. The focus got shifted from health and

environmental safety and quality to economic concerns and property value assessments .

### **What the Anti-Myth Reveals**

In contrast, the anti-myth raises uncomfortable questions. The anti-myth points to the gaps in information about the scope of the environmental hazard and the unknown and unmeasured health effects of exposure. The anti-myth casts light on the fact that while Gibbs may have been a hero to her constituents and to the people of her specific community and group, she was viewed as an adversary to the other groups who struggled at Love Canal. Rather than being a hero or a "justice-fighter" as she suggested, the evidence I gathered suggests that she allowed herself to be used by government in a way that hurt her other neighbors or that she actively worked to leave them out of any substantive settlement.

We are also left with the uncomfortable realization that justice was not done at Love Canal- for anyone. While there was certainly an unequal distribution of benefits that hurt the renters, there was also no provisions made for the health of these people and the future generations- no follow-up, no guarantees of medical care and special attention-information. And, because of the open-ended way that the final decisions were made, other people can now be moved in to Love Canal. It shows that refusing to work with government- as Waggoneer did- and trying to build a coalition of citizens with different interests- was risky- for it led his group (CAR) to get less compensation than Gibbs'.

The fact that the "winners" were the most powerful group, with greater resources, status and access to government and the fact that the "losers" were those who were Black, female and poor, suggests that discrimination was a factor in the treatment and outcomes of the two groups. The unequal treatment of renters suggests that there was a pattern of discrimination against Blacks and the poor, at work at Love Canal. The fact that the settlement benefited the short-term goals of the most powerful group and hurt the least powerful is clearly significant. Throughout my examination, I have shown that the renters were treated differently, that their concerns were marginalized, that they were shut out of the decision making processes. They did not have the same access as Gibbs had to informal channels of political access. And, ultimately the fact that they did not have the same political clout, status and resources, led them to be hurt profoundly by what happened at Love Canal.

While Gibbs had special access to the informal channels of influence, the renters did not. Clearly, it is difficult to sort out which of these factors- racism, classism or sexism- most effected the inequity of the settlement- or to the inter-mix of all of these. But taken together, we see that the renters had less "status" than homeowners- less political "pull", less political leverage, less ability to attract media coverage, less ability to get sympathy from the power structure and those who made it up.

### **Discrimination**

My investigation added information about the renter population, showing that they were not only distinguished by race but also other attributes. As I showed in Chapter 4, the dominant version often emphasizes race and omits information about other vital characteristics such as gender and family composition. My work shows that the renter population was made up primarily of single-female headed-households and children. The average family had many children. Many of the renters were recipients of AFDC. In contrast, most homeowners were white and lived in nuclear families with a few children. Though many were lower-class, working as blue-collar workers, their status as property owners divided them from poor renters.

Uncovering the myth, we see what discrimination is and what it leads to. In this case, different actors discriminated in different ways. The unequal treatment received by renters is one reflection of the discrimination; while government accommodated and compensated homeowners for their exposure, they did not do so for renters. Federal and State government also lied to and tried to mislead renters, as evidenced by Martha Lewis' report. Renters did not have the kind of access to people in power, or to informal channels that Gibbs did. Their test results were taken after homeowners' had been analyzed, and they did not receive results even 6 months after the crisis had begun: their health issues, symptoms and demands were treated as if they were secondary. While homeowners were able to keep the settlements they received in personal injury settlements, renters are not; they are dependent on the clinic system which has fewer specialists and less information about the effects of exposure.

The most blatant discrimination came from other citizens. At one of the first community-wide meeting, Mrs. Herbert and other renters were told to "shut up and sit down". Some racial comments were made which indicated that there was no understanding of the renters' plight. Homeowners did not only discriminate against renters because of their race, but also because they owned no property and were considered welfare recipients. In her book, we see Gibbs trying to play on racial stereotypes by suggesting that her safety was in danger by the "violent" renters who had knives. Racial and class differences- and the homeowners refusal or inability to overcome them- meant that there was a breakdown of communication, cooperation and understanding. Instead, there was a divide between the two groups, a competition.

Though Levine raises the subject of racial discrimination, her treatment is superficial. Rather than stating definitively that homeowners made racist remarks- which were documented by the Niagara Falls Gazette - Levine writes, "racial remarks were muttered or thought to be muttered (196)". Instead of analyzing these comments, Levine dismisses them as insignificant, with the only result being that, "the renters' feelings were hurt and some felt unsure about their welcome" (199) at the LCHA meeting. This dismissive treatment of a complex subject shows both her insensitivity to the renters' experience of being discriminated against, and her failure to analyze

the ramifications of the remarks and what they reveal about the social environment at Love Canal. Rather than questioning why or the significance of them, Levine's analysis suggests that it is understandable, given the differences "in income and life circumstances". Because she does not examine critically this issue of why and how this decisive issue got set off at Love Canal, an important lesson about the role of race in community organizing is obscured.

### **What Lessons Can We Learn From Uncovering the Myth?**

From uncovering the myth, we have gained insight into **how the federal government operates** to resolve crises. In my review of the dominant and alternate literature, I showed that Federal government officials took a number of different actions which influenced the development and tactics of the citizen groups. Officials influenced the selection of Gibbs as leader because she seemed "easy to work with" and then chose to negotiate with the LCHA- and not the others. Although I initially thought that the Federal government chose the LCHA because it was representing the interests of the most powerful group- the homeowners- I see that there are other reasons. Government not only negotiated with the LCHA because it was a homeowners' group- for it ignored Waggoneer's CAR- but also because Gibbs was willing to play political games- while Waggoneer wasn't. Not only did Waggoneer refuse to "work with government", he also attempted to create a coalition, combining the interests of both renters and homeowners. Unlike Gibbs who was solely concerned with her constituents, Waggoneer seemed to be more concerned with the entire community- with all residents, recognizing their common interests. Unlike the RA, the LCHA was not initially combative or directly confrontational with the government. We have seen that while the RA was filing an injunction to stop the remediation project, Gibbs was negotiating, for which the government rewarded her by giving her group an office.

### **Divide and Conquer**

There are lessons we can learn from seeing this story of a divided citizenry and by uncovering the injustice of the settlement which rewarded the most powerful at the expense of the weakest. In many ways, the settlement at Love Canal- the fact that all citizens lost in some way and the weakest lost in all- illustrates what can happen when citizens are not united and allow themselves to be divided and conquered by government. This examination teaches an important lesson: namely that the Federal government intentionally or not- tries to divide communities- and that the unified community is stronger.

We have seen that at Love Canal the "divide and conquer" strategy worked to some extent for the government. For citizens, the results of a divided citizenry were that all citizens lost out. Although there are clearly categories of "losers" in this story, all citizens are losers in some ways. As we have seen at Love Canal, citizens had common concerns that cut across all lines and specific ones which depended on their status. Because the citizens

were divided, government only had to fulfill the particular goals of the most powerful group- and not the general aims of all citizens. Had citizens been united- they would have all benefited more.

The Federal government, taking advantage of the division, settled on the basis of the specific, short-term goal of the LCHA. Although the settlement was to the temporary benefit of the LCHA, it was to the detriment of all of the citizens in the long-run. Had they been united, they would have had a greater chance of achieving both their common and specific goals. Because they were divided- government had a greater measure of control- as it could threaten the homeowners, for example, by saying: "we will negotiate with the renters if you don't cooperate." Had the citizens been united and had Gibbs not played into the divisive tactics of the government- the lingering questions of health would have been examined more; probably, people would not be returning to Love Canal to live. Because they were not united, the Federal government could settle with one group and give them their short-term goal- i.e., being evacuated, instead of the long-term, of gaining health follow-up. The settlement also allows all levels of government to give a sense of closure.

Other community groups can learn from this: to perceive their interests more widely, to strategize about the long-term as well as short-term goals, and to think about the position of greatest strength to assume when negotiating. Part of the pre-organizing strategy must be to try to overcome the schisms of race, class, ethnicity or gender that afflict the community so citizens can present a unified front. Perceiving their interests widely, drawing coalitions with many diverse groups can only strengthen the bargaining power of any group- and the likelihood that some of their long-term as well as short-term goals will be addressed.

Even Gibbs admitted to me that the Federal government was threatened by the possibility of a united citizenry for they would have had much greater influence and power. Clearly, in some ways, this is true, as government could not have played one group off of the other, as Gibbs suggested that they tried to do with her. There was also a lot of evidence that deep racial and class divisions existed in the area prior to the crisis. In order to become unified, these prejudices would have had to be dealt with and overcome. But Gibbs would have needed a lot of experience to have realized this- and a different understanding of government. From the beginning of her book she communicates a great trust in government, a willingness to negotiate, an expectation that government "would do the right thing." She was not an experienced organizer, and rather than turning to the other groups sharing her problems, she developed a relationship with government- a dialogue, and interaction- to accomplish her goals. She was partly successful though perhaps not as successful as she could have been. And rather than contributing to the healing of the neighborhood, she just served to divide it more- contributing to the problems. Clearly, the entire resolution of the crisis was not as she wanted- for people are being moved back in now, and she has no further information about her and her children's health. Although the

LCHA did get their first goal- it was at a high price: at the expense of guarantees about their health care, follow-up. The way that Gibbs negotiated- made the LCHA pick their short-term goal and throw the others to the wind: a strategy that may not have benefited them in the long-run. Deciding to focus on their financial investment, they failed to earn guarantees that the government would provide information, treatment and follow-up.

### **Epilogue: What I have Learned**

From my investigation and analysis of the Love Canal crisis and story, I have learned 4 important lessons which I hope can be useful to others as well. Two of them have to do with the way that we interpret and report on events. The other two have to do with community organizing and political change.

I have learned that while scholars and reporters aspire to "objectivity", it is extremely difficult to alter the lens through which we understand things, which is conditioned by class, race, gender, family structure and personal experience. All of these things condition our vision- which is really what and who we see, and how we determine where the "fence" or demarcation of concern ends. The reporters who downplayed the renters' plight or who omitted them from later press accounts did not do this with malicious intent. Rather, it was an oversight, resulting from their experiences as white men living in this society. Unlike Mr. Eve or Mrs. Lewis, the primarily white, middle-class reporters had no tie or connection drawing them to the renters, wondering about their plight. Because Mr. Eve and Mrs. Lewis are Black, they were immediately drawn to the renters and felt an affinity with them. Levine and the others immediately related to the white middle-class homeowners, and their allegiance to them is shown throughout their work.

Like many of the reporters and academics, I am from a white, middle-class family. This conditions my vision, though other factors do too. I was raised by my mother and we had financial difficulties which immediately gave me a connection with the renters. I also grew up with people of color and I learned that we are allies facing similar types of discrimination. Because of my background, I had more of an inclination to wonder about what happened to the Black people, to the poor people, to the women.

Even though I had this background, I too got dazzled by the myth of Gibbs and the LCHA. As a feminist, I wanted to believe that it was more possible for women to forge connections with other oppressed people and to build coalitions. I believed in this so much that I was almost willing to ignore all evidence suggesting this was not true. My discussions of this subject with Professor Mel King, reminded me to not forget about the Black people of the Canal. I was able to have a dialogue with many people from diverse viewpoints about this subject, and this forced me to be honest- to collect all of the information, to try to see the situation in all of its complexity.

The first lesson I learned is how important it is to widen constantly the lens through which I perceive the world and events I cover or analyze. It is vital to continue to have dialogues with people from different experiences and points of view and to try to learn from them. I believe that it is also imperative for students, reporters and academics to be trained to be aware of

their lens and to question the ways in which they are not being "objective" which means inclusive of all peoples. This can be done by having a diverse group of people and viewpoints in workplaces and schools, and by studying instances like this in which experience and vantage point completely changed the way in which a story was reported and understood.

The second lesson that I learned is the necessity of placing events in their historical context. The media and the academics almost universally failed to place the Love Canal crisis in its historical context. They neither assessed the causes of the crisis nor identified the pattern of regional contamination which the crisis revealed. Had they looked at the dumping in its historical period, tracing the causes, they would have identified the Federal weapon and atomic build-up in the region, and they would have uncovered the true scope of the problem. Instead, they merely reported that the dumping had occurred, as an almost isolated incident. Their analysis was limited to merely reporting on the current occurrences or their import, without showing the underlying significance.

The third lesson I learned is about community organizing. Before this study, I almost naively believed that once a community faced a common threat they would automatically overcome all divisions to form a united front. From this study, I have learned that sometimes the divisions intensify in time of crisis. Instead of forming coalitions, citizens become pitted against each other, to the benefit of the government which can then compensate one group and not all groups. It is necessary to identify the divisions in the community as a pre-organizing step, and to try to have a long-term vision and a commitment to developing the neighborhood and all the people in it. I believe that Mrs. Rich had this attitude. Rather than focusing on how much money she would receive in compensation- she focused on health, a long-term concern that all citizens-homeowners and renters- shared in common. Had her vision been leading the people, perhaps the outcome would have been different.

Fourth, my discussions with Mrs. Rich and the other renters gave me hope about what is possible in working for social change. Although the renters experienced racial discrimination from the homeowners, they did not discriminate against the white renters. In fact, they were a very tight-knit, harmonious community of Blacks and whites. This gives me hope that racism can be overcome and that bridges of understanding can be built between people.

Mrs. Rich also showed me a way of organizing in contrast to Gibbs'. Although she is very poor, she renounced materialistic values and spoke about the importance of quality of life and health. Although she told me of the hateful ways that Gibbs and other homeowners behaved, she did not adopt their hate, but spoke about their plight with understanding. Rather than trying to downplay the homeowners' concerns, she validated them and asked for validation in return. Her way of being- of meeting hate with love and lack of understanding with understanding is very valuable in trying to



build a community organization. And it is vital in overcoming the cleavages of race, class and gender which abound in this country.

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